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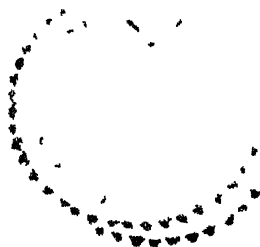
# MR. HUFFAM

AND

OTHER STORIES

BY

HUGH WALPOLE



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## PUBLISHERS' NOTE

THROUGHOUT his writing life Hugh Walpole wrote occasional short stories, and from time to time he assembled the best of them for publication in a volume. The last such collection was *Head in Green Bronze*.

From the stories uncollected at the time of his death, the publishers, in agreement with the literary executors, have chosen the contents of this final volume. Nearly all these stories were written during the author's last years: one or two date from earlier times.





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## THE WHITE CAT



## THE WHITE CAT

VERY strange things happen to very ordinary people. This is an account of one of them. It would have been difficult, perhaps, to find in the whole of America a more ordinary man than Mr. Thornton Busk. He did not himself think that he was anything at all unusual, and yet he had always had a very pretty pride in himself and considered, as most of us do, that it was quite essential for the happy continuance of the history of the world that he should live and be well fed and have a happy and prosperous time.

He came to Hollywood from New York partly because of the climate, partly because he thought he might do a little writing for the films, partly because a very lovely girl whom he knew had gone to try her own fortune there. He'd been in Hollywood five years and it may be said of him that during that time he was happy rather than successful. He had a very cheerful nature. He was good-looking in a quite ordinary way, dark and slim and always correctly dressed. He was useful to women who did not know what to do with their time, and he never had an original idea about anything.

He discovered to his mild surprise that he was

not needed by anybody to write for the films, and soon had, as everyone has in Hollywood, a personal story about how near he'd come to achieving this, and by what an unlucky chance he'd just missed that, and how So-and-so, the director of one of the best films of the decade, was his very best friend, and would have given him so much to do if it hadn't happened that there were so many people already engaged in doing it.

He did not really feel himself ill-used. There are so many parties of so many kinds in Hollywood that you can go out somewhere all the time wherever you are. And there is always a chance that someone quite world-famous will be sitting next to you at the Vendome or dancing quite close to you at the Trocadero. His five years were entertaining and even exciting, and it seemed to him that he had plenty of friends. At the end of the five years what he hadn't got was plenty of money. He discovered with a shock that his capital was almost gone and that although millions of dollars were rolling about the Hollywood streets, none of them seemed to roll in his direction.

It was then that he began to think seriously of a charming English lady, Mrs. Grace Ferguson. Mrs. Ferguson was a rich widow who had a pretty house on Rodeo Drive, and entertained a great deal in a quiet, ladylike fashion. She was one of the English who, coming to California on a short visit, are entrapped by the sun and never again escape. Her husband, a kind elderly man, who was on the London Stock Exchange, had been dead some ten years. She was quite alone in the

world. Except for her large white cat, Penelope, she had apparently no near friends. She had, of course, plenty of acquaintances, and as it is the practice of every American to be charming at the actual moment of contact, all her acquaintances seemed to her to be friends. It is quite possible for an English man or woman to make very real and beautiful friendships in America, lasting ones and sincere, but it is often very difficult for the English to distinguish clearly between friendships and acquaintances. The dividing line is so very clear in their own more cautious country.

There were horrible times when Mrs. Ferguson felt very lonely indeed, and wondered if she had any friends. At such horrible moments she would feel a great wave of homesickness for the long white moors of Northumberland, the rocky bays of Cornwall, and the deep violet-scented lanes of Devonshire. She found that it was then that she wrote long letters to friends in England, saying that she would very shortly be home, recalling the many happy days they'd spent together, and hoping a little wistfully that they had not all entirely forgotten her. Then quickly again would come the delightful excitements of her social world. A concert in the Bowl under the stars (the seats were very damp and it was necessary to wear quite heavy Arctic clothing), an eventful première at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, a lovely trip in somebody's yacht to Catalina, a most interesting lecture given by a yogi from India. It seemed to her on such occasions that she was surrounded by friends, warm-hearted, enchanted



to see her, hating to be parted from her, ready to do anything in the world to make her happy.

Thornton Busk was one of these. A very, very charming man, always smiling, always at your service, full of jokes, a little flirtatious (but not to any dangerous extent), good-hearted and unselfish. She liked him very much indeed. She told him that he would always be welcome at any of her parties. When Thornton began to consider her seriously, he was surprised at himself for not having considered her seriously before. She had, he understood, so much money that she really did not know what to do with it all, and in these days that was most unusual. Moreover, she was not like so many ladies with money, vulgar and unprepossessing. She had the rather aesthetic charm of the delicate English lady. Someone with whom you'd never consider being passionate. Someone with whom you would never be bored.

But when he began to consider her more seriously, he found that passion was not so difficult to conceive. It was unquestioned that she had never been awakened. He knew, he had been told it often enough, how stolid and unimaginative were most elderly English husbands. There had been no scandal about her in Hollywood. She liked men, but kept them at a distance. It would be amusing to awaken her. He flattered himself that it would not really be difficult. Here, indeed, was a splendid way out of all his troubles. He began to pay her very definite court. He noticed that as soon as he began to take a deeper interest in Grace Ferguson, her house and its surroundings

also became more personally alive to him.

It was a pretty place in the English style, with cosy rooms and a charming garden at the back with a small pool, a badminton court, some large banana trees and fine mimosa bushes. Her drawing-room and dining-room were in white with some good etchings. Everything was in admirable taste, but a little like herself, quietly aesthetic, rather without personality, gently hospitable. On a certain afternoon he found himself sitting at the end of the dark-blue sofa, very close to her, as she asked him whether he would have tea or a highball. When he said a highball, she asked whether he preferred Scotch or Bourbon. It was all very restful, very friendly, almost intimate.

‘Say, do you know what I’ve been thinking?’ And he leaned over the end of the sofa and with one hand touched her arm.

‘No, what?’

‘Wouldn’t it be a grand idea to go down to San Diego for a night or two? There’s the Fair, and we’d get one or two more — Barney, the Thwaites and Lucille. We’d have a grand time.’

‘Yes, I think I should like that,’ she said in her quiet English way. ‘The Fair ought to be amusing. I loved them at home when I was a child.’

He looked on her face so steadily that she glanced up and looked back at him, questioningly, as though she would say: ‘Aren’t you a little different today? What’s happened?’ And he felt different. He thought for the first time since he had known her that he would like to take her in his arms and kiss her. He wondered why he had

never wanted to do this before. He did not know that once a plan begins to work in your brain, it gathers about it aid, assistance. It amuses itself with cheating you a little.

'We've been grand friends,' he said, 'a long time now. I heard an Englishman say the other day that Americans were superficial, but I don't think so, do you?' And he touched her hand for a brief instant; almost stroked it, and then sat back on the sofa, turning away from her a little. She looked at him with her mild blue eyes, smiling gently, a little maternally. She was thinking: 'He's a nice boy. I like him better today than ever before.' She said, 'Yes, I think you are superficial, most of you. English people take friendship very seriously. When they have a friend it's for life.'

'That's the matter with the English,' he answered. 'They're altogether too serious. They can't have a good time and then forget about it.' He turned and looked at her very gravely indeed. 'But you're not like that with me, Grace. You mean a hell of a lot to me, you do, indeed. I like you being quiet, cautious. American girls aren't quiet any more.'

'I'm glad our friendship means something to you,' she said gently. 'I've never quite known.'

'Well, you know now,' he answered. 'You're just about the best friend I've got.'

He finished his highball reflectively. What would she do if he should kiss her? English women are so strange. They lead you on and then pretend that they know nothing about it.

And the trouble is that they really are surprised. They complain bitterly that you've ruined a beautiful friendship, and very often they really do value the friendship more than the passion.

What would Grace be like if she should surrender? And would he be feeling the same about her if she hadn't a penny? Yes, he believed he would. He felt quite a holy feeling stealing over him, and he asked for another highball. All the same, it was pleasant to think that she was so wonderfully wealthy. And then he noticed the cat. He had never really thought of it before, except that it had occurred to him once and again that women without husbands, lovers or children were apt to waste a great deal of emotion on animals. If he had thought about the cat at all, he'd have been aware of its odd devotion to Grace. Odd, he thought, because cats are always aloof. They lived their own lives and despised human beings.

But this cat, a very large and pure white Persian (or was it a Persian? He'd never seen a Persian so large and so white. He must ask her, some time, its breed) — this cat, Penelope, seemed really to be devoted to Grace. He had noticed that, when Grace left the room, the cat sank into a kind of cold neutrality. He had sometimes attempted to win it over, not because he liked cats, but because he believed in that old adage that animals and children were fond of only good men. Any little proof that he was good, he eagerly accepted. But Penelope would never have anything to do with him at all. It wasn't that she

disliked him, it was rather that he did not exist. And he had felt on one or two occasions, when he was waiting in the drawing-room for Grace, that under the icy grey stare Penelope caused him to sink into nothing.

This afternoon, however, was the first occasion on which he was aware that the cat quite definitely regarded him. As he touched Grace's hand for that brief instant, the cat, that had been lying in a great white mass near the window, raised itself ever so slightly. The big handsome head turned in his direction.

'That's the best-looking cat I've ever seen,' he said. 'How old is it? Have you had it always?'

'Yes, from a tiny kitten. How old is it? Oh, I don't know — eight or nine years, perhaps.'

'Seems damn fond of you.'

'Yes, it is.'

'That's strange. One gets to thinking that cats have no feelings for anyone but themselves.'

Grace Ferguson smiled. 'Oh, that's quite untrue. Come here, Penelope.'

The cat raised itself at once, and, with great delicacy for so large an animal, softly crossed the floor. It stood with its back arched a little against Grace's leg. It purred very gently. Then for a moment the purr ceased. It raised its head and looked at Thornton.

'You know,' he said, laughing, 'I don't think that cat likes me.'

'Perhaps it doesn't,' she replied. 'Penelope can be jealous.'

‘Jealous?’ This was altogether a new idea to him. ‘I don’t think,’ he said, ‘that cats care that much. They think only of themselves.’

‘It’s very easy,’ she answered, ‘to explain affection by love of personal comfort. I suppose cats are selfish, but Penelope isn’t an ordinary cat.’

It was after this little conversation that Thornton began to be involved in strange personal experiences. We all know what it is to enter on a certain day into a new atmosphere. We pass into a world where everything seems to go perversely. Letters that we need do not arrive, appointments are broken, a fog, especially on this Californian coast, comes up and obscures the sun, the ground seems to quiver right beneath our feet. It was so now with Thornton. In the first place he had a strange sense of urgency — as though someone whispered to him, ‘Lose no time over this or it will be too late.’

Hollywood is a nervous, hysterical place. Nothing is sure from day to day for anyone. Even the principal stars, who are supposed to live in such settled glory, do not know from picture to picture how their reputation may be affected. And this uncertainty spreads outside the actual studios into the surrounding world. While Thornton had money in the bank he could defy the sudden unexpected demands on his purse. There is a kind of careless extravagance in the air and with it forgetfulness, so that one is constantly exposed to expenses that one cannot pay. And because everyone else is suffering from the same

economic uncertainty, emotional explosions are quite common. The air seems thinner here and nerves more frequently exasperated.

Thornton's rooms were the upper part of a strange, rather desolate little wooden building on Sunset Boulevard, the lower half of which was occupied by a lady who evidenced each night in brilliant electric lights that she gave psychic readings. These rooms had seemed smart and elegant when he first occupied them, but everything becomes easily shabby and worn in Hollywood because of the brilliant sunshine, unless it is carefully looked after. He had decorated his rooms in Mexican fashion . . . Mexican rugs and hangings of very bright colours, and then, contrary to these, a roll-top desk at which he had hoped to write for the films, a modern armchair that swirled round when you sat on it in a surprisingly disconcerting fashion, a settee of brown plush, which clung to you as though in a bad temper when you wanted to leave it. He had photographs of film stars in silver frames and hoped that his friends would consider them intimate gifts. But he did not care for the silver. The sudden sense that his surroundings were shabby and ominous was one thing that made him want to hasten into Mrs. Ferguson's arms. The sooner that he was in her beautiful house the better.

He developed a kind of obsession, not so much for herself as for her possessions. And yet, he thought himself that he loved her; that he couldn't have conceived such tenderness for her simply because she was wealthy. This was in all

probability true. He looked forward to seeing her, and when he saw her he at once imagined her in his arms, and a sense of comfort and affection stole about him. For the first time he began to pity himself and to wonder why it was that, with such good brains, he had not gone further. Some guys have all the breaks, he told himself. But now perhaps, with her at his side always encouraging him, showing him what it was that he could do best, he would astonish the world with his gifts.

So the afternoon came, a foggy, cold afternoon, with a mist that seemed gloomily alive; to have arms and tentacles and a sort of weeping dreariness like a tiresome friend who must always insist on being comforted. Her drawing-room was cheerful, a log fire was blazing, and he noticed again, as of late he had so often done, how brilliant and fresh her pictures and curtains and furniture were. When he entered the room, the white cat was asleep in front of the fire. The Chinese manservant said that his mistress would be down in a few minutes. He was alone with Penelope.

He sat down, picked up a copy of *Time*, wondered how those boys could be so brilliant week after week and also so unkind to practically everybody, tried to think of world politics and to believe himself a man of affairs, but was aware that his heart was beating with such an agitation that he was unable to think of anything but himself.

That was because within another half-hour he would propose to Grace Ferguson, and would, in all probability, be as good as married before he



left that room. He had no doubt but that she would accept him.

But was it only that?

Looking about him he felt that something in the room was discomfoting, and then was conscious, to his own extreme surprise, that he hated to be alone with the cat. The animal had not moved, and then quite suddenly it stretched out a lazy paw and scratched the carpet. The sound made him shiver.

'Don't do that!' he said aloud, as though he were speaking to a living person. The cat very slowly turned its head. He noticed then for the first time how intense were its large grey eyes. And even as he looked at them, the heavy lids obscured them. It was as though the cat were looking at him with twice the intensity through that blinded vision. Nothing in the room moved, and yet it seemed to him that the cat had come closer and grown larger. The whole room was filled with a sort of warm furry odour, almost as though he would soon be stifled with it.

Grace came in and he gave a little sigh of relief. He had his highball and she had her tea. Then he said, his voice shaking a little: 'Grace, I want to tell you . . . I've been wanting to for weeks. I'm in love with you.' She turned and looked at him with so kindly a maternal expression that he felt for a moment like a little boy who had asked to be taken to the circus.

'That's very sweet of you,' she said softly, 'dear Thornton. But you can't be in love with an old woman like me.'

Old!' he laughed. 'Why, Grace, you're wonderful! You're no age — you're every age. You're the woman I love and I want you to marry me.' At the same time he put out his hand and caught hers. She said nothing and he began to be uneasy.

'We are neither of us children,' he said. 'I'm not much. I haven't anything to offer, except devotion and loyalty. I'll be as good to you as I know how.' (He had a ridiculous notion that he was quoting something from a story in a magazine.) She did not take her hand away, she even pressed his a little.

'I've been married once, you know,' she said. She laughed. 'There are two kinds of widows: those who believe in marriage and those who don't. It depends, I suppose, on what their experience has been.'

'Well?' he asked, drawing his chair a little nearer to hers.

'Well — I don't know. I was very happy with Egbert. The only thing I had against him really was his name. I like you very much, Thornton. I think we would get on very well together. I'll confess to you that I'm often very lonely. I can't think of anyone I'd be better friends with, but——'

'But?' he said eagerly.

'I've got accustomed to my life as it is. It isn't perfect. Nobody's life is. But on the whole, it's safe. And I'm not quite alone. There's Penelope.'

'Penelope!' he said mockingly.

'Oh, you don't know. You'd be surprised if you did.'

'Now come.' He put his arm around her gently, but he spoke with a sudden masterful decision. 'You can't pretend you won't marry me because of a cat. I could do more for you than a cat can. I love you, and that's what you haven't got in your life.'

'Yes.' He noticed that she didn't move away from him, that she came, if possible, a little closer. 'I know.' She looked at him. 'I like you so much.'

He thought that the moment had come. He drew her to him and kissed her, as he hoped, passionately. Still she did not withdraw. She returned his kiss, but a little as though he were her boy who had just told her that he had won a prize at school. Well, after all, did he want passion? He thought that on the whole he did not.

'Marry me, marry me!' he said urgently, kissing her eyes. 'You'll be so happy, Grace. I'll see that you are. I can't live without you.' He coughed suddenly. He felt as though his mouth were full of fur. He choked. 'I'm so sorry. Wait a moment.' He drank a little of his highball. 'Something in my throat.'

Then he turned to her, his whole being urgent with the necessity of her submitting. 'Listen, say yes. I don't know what I should do without you now. You can save me — make something of me. I'll serve you so faithfully.'

He actually fell on his knees beside her, put

his arms round her just as he had so often seen people do in the theatre. He felt her response. For a moment it was as though she were going to yield to him completely. Then she drew back.

‘Let me think it over, Thornton. Leave me to myself for a day or two.’ She looked at him again, curiously, anxiously. ‘Do you think Anglo-American marriages ever work? Isn’t there something both so friendly and antagonistic between the two countries that we can never really be comfortable together? And I’m not very interesting. I’m terribly ordinary. One of the millions of middle-aged Englishwomen who have to content themselves with the little things. I’m afraid you might find me very dull.’

‘You dull!’ he cried. And now he was entirely sincere. ‘Why, we’ve never had a dull moment together; you know that’s true. It’s because we’ve been such companions. We like so many of the same things, and I want to guard you, protect you. I feel that you’re so defenceless.’

It was then that he saw the cat rise very slowly from its place in front of the fire and walk across the room. It was a strange thing, but both of them turned and stared at it. It walked as though it saw neither of them, and yet Thornton felt that it enclosed him; tightened the air about his nose and throat and mouth. All that Thornton knew was that, for this moment at least, the scene was ended. He got up.

‘All right, I’ll give you your day or two, but don’t refuse me. For God’s sake be kind.’ And

with a splendid masterful action, he strode from the room.

Three days later she said that she would marry him. 'After all,' she admitted, her cheek pressed against his, 'it's only Penelope who'll object.'

'That damn cat,' he said, drawing away from her ever so little; 'you're always mentioning it.'

'Well, you see, it's been the important thing in my life for so long. She's not an ordinary cat. She's done such strange things. There was Mr. Mangan, for instance——' She hesitated.

'Well?' asked Thornton, feeling, from he knew not where, a strange tremor down his spine.

'Percy Mangan. It wasn't anything really, only he flirted a little, you know — and next morning he wrote me such a strange letter. He was going back to New York, because of a nightmare, he said. I never saw him again, but I know it was something to do with Penelope.'

'Listen, darling.' He took her face firmly between his hands and was a little annoyed with himself that he should be thinking of her money rather than of her proximity. 'You're not to have exaggerated notions about this cat. That's one of the things I'm going to stop when we're married.'

Grace shook her head. 'Yes, I know. All the same, Penelope can't bear that anyone should be fond of me. She scratched Benjie Cooper's face once so that he couldn't go about in public for weeks.'

Thornton felt a chill in the room. He looked

about him, but the cat was not there. 'This is all nonsense,' he said. 'Rather than have that cat make our lives miserable, I'll have it chloroformed.'

She gave him then such a strange, clear look. 'I don't think you could,' she said. 'Penelope's an extraordinary cat. If she didn't want to be chloroformed, she wouldn't be, whatever you might do.'

In fact, he went away from the house that evening less happy than he should be. He did not know what was the matter with him. He ought to be radiant. He was not in love with Grace, but he was very fond of her. They were excellent companions. Financially, he was safe for life.

It was one of those lovely evenings when the sunlit air bathes all the strange little bungalows and untidy lots and oil-pumps and new petrol stations and temporary homes of the ventriloquists or psychic reader, psychology interpreters and soul-healers, and transmutes them all into a lovely filmlike iridescence. So much more unreal, so much more exhilarating and depressing at the same time, than true sunlight. He went home. He opened his door, entered his sitting-room. There, staring at him, was the white cat. He looked again. It was not there. 'Now this is absurd,' he told himself. 'That cat is beginning to get on my nerves. There is no cat there.' But he felt in his nostrils a warm, furry, stifling sensation. He went and had a shower and changed his clothes.

He telephoned Grace. 'Just to know whether you're happy, darling.'

'Of course I'm happy.'

'Thinking about me?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Is Penelope there sitting in front of the fire?'

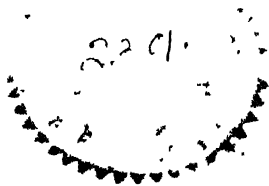
'Yes. As a matter of fact, she's on my lap.'

He had an absurd instinct to scream through the telephone: 'Put her down! Put her down! Don't touch her!' But he wished Grace a loving good-night, turned from the telephone and saw the cat walking from his sitting-room into his bedroom. He went into his bedroom. There was no cat there. That night he had a dream. Somebody warned him, he couldn't in the morning remember who, that he'd better not marry Grace Ferguson. Suspended on a little cloud between heaven and earth, he enquired why. 'It's not safe,' said the angel or the devil or whoever it might be. On about the third day from this, driving Grace up to one of the Bowl concerts, he said to her, 'Darling, I haven't been drinking. I don't know what's the matter with me.'

'Why?' she asked him, laying her little hand on his.

'I'm always seeing your cat. At least, I don't know whether I see it or don't. It seems to be there; and then it isn't.'

She pressed his hand. 'Penelope has been rather strange the last few days,' she said. 'I felt a little frightened of her myself, as though I were doing something wrong. You do love me, Thornton, don't you?'



'Love you,' he breathed.

'Because if you didn't, if you were marrying me for some other reason, I can imagine Penelope doing something terrible. She isn't an ordinary cat. You say you fancy you've seen her. Well, so did I once. I was at Palm Springs for a week or two and I left her at home with the servants. You'll think me ridiculous, I know, but she came every evening just as the sun was fading behind the mountains. She would be there, she would rub herself against my leg.'

For the first time since his friendship with her, Thornton was irritable.

'Oh, don't, Grace! This is ridiculous. We're both ridiculous.'

They got out, gave the car to a parking attendant and walked slowly up the hill without speaking.

Two nights later, he awoke suddenly and thought that he was choking to death. He sat up gasping, beating the air with his hands. As he sat there, his heart hammering, his whole body trembling, staring into the darkness, something again whispered to him: 'Give this marriage up. You're in danger.'

Next day he felt so unwell that he consulted a doctor. There was, it seemed, nothing actually the matter with him, but his friends all noticed the change. He was pale and he looked as though he hadn't slept. His manner was nervous and irritable. For three days he did not see Grace, and during that time quite seriously considered



whether he would not run away. Something was driving him. He would write to her when he got to New York. He would borrow some money from someone there and go to Europe. He would fly to New York. He nearly did.

And then his pride and his real affection for Grace, his thought, too, of the economic comforts waiting for him, these were all too much for him. He stayed. He spent the long afternoon in Grace's drawing-room, tempting her to comfort him. When she knew that he suffered, she was distraught and distressed; her affection for him grew into love, because the real basis of her nature was maternal. She loved him that afternoon. Penelope sat without moving in a square of sunlight and never looked at either of them.

On that same evening, he went to bed early. He had no appetite. His whole body was weary, as though he were beginning some kind of attack. Was it influenza? He took several aspirins and a strong highball.

He awoke quite suddenly with a start of apprehension. He switched on the electric light and saw from his clock that it was a quarter to three in the morning. Then he looked around the room and saw the white cat lying up against the wall opposite the bed. He knew then such fear as he had never before experienced. The cat this time did not vanish as he looked at it. It seemed to grow larger, and there was something quite horrible about its watching, emotionless impassivity. While he sat there and stared, he told

himself of his own foolishness. All that he had to do was to get out of bed and walk out of the door.

He moved and felt that he was caught, as one sometimes is, by the bedclothes. He pushed against them and got one bare foot to the floor. At the same moment the cat moved, not its head, but rather its back, which seemed to arch and shiver very slightly as though it were shaking itself.

He got the other foot to the floor, and then, his hands gripping the bedclothes, he watched the animal. It slowly rose, stretched first one leg, then the other, then very softly came towards him. When it was half-way across the floor it crouched, watching him with its large grey eyes; the great white body seemed to be instinct with power. It looked as though it might spring with a tiger's action.

He screamed hysterically, 'Get out! Get out!' and then, drawing himself back into bed again, let himself drop on the other side away from the door.

The cat moved towards the bed, and now it was so close to him that he could feel the hot foetid jungle air of its breath, and in its deep grey eyes he saw an intensity of malevolence. But the stupor of a few moments ago had left him. He felt now all activity. Could he but reach the door and escape, all would be well. But as he turned his head, the cat gave a soundless leap and to his horror was crouching there on the top of the bed quite close to him.

He made a movement and the cat, drawing

itself on its belly, came to the very edge of the bed, its eyes with a steady burning intensity fixed on him.

He fell on his knees. The air, now close against his eyes, nostrils and mouth, was of so sickening a stench that he could not breathe.

He looked up. His mouth opened for a scream of terror, but no sound came.

The cat leapt. He felt its claws on his cheek. He was stifled with the press of warm fur. . . .

When next morning Grace Ferguson read that Mr. Thornton Busk was found in his apartment, clad in his pyjamas, on the floor of his bedroom, dead, she burst into a storm of tears. It seemed that he had died of heart failure. Feeling unwell, he had crawled out of bed to get assistance and had died there on the floor. On each cheek there was a tiny scratch for which there was no accounting.

She cried her heart out. She had been so very fond of Thornton. She felt at the same time a strange relief. She had been free for so long, and now she was free again. Poor Thornton! The excitement of these last few days had been too much for him. The Chinese boy brought in the saucer of milk that Penelope enjoyed always at a settled time. Grace Ferguson blew her nose, dried her eyes, and, her voice a little broken with her crying, said:

'Come, Penelope. Here's your milk, darling.'

The cat got up, walked across to the saucer, began happily to lap. It purred its hearty contentment.

# THE TRAIN TO THE SEA



## THE TRAIN TO THE SEA

THE Godley family gave, a week before Christmas, a fine party.

It is scarcely true perhaps to say that they *gave* it, for it was one of those evenings so familiar to the Godleys when Muriel had said to somebody, 'Oh, I know we'll be at home tonight,' or Frank had remarked to his favourite girl, 'Well, look in if you're doing nothing better,' or Godley himself had said to his best friend, Peabody, 'Well, you know you're always welcome, Harry.'

Stray remarks like these, all with the Godley sincerity, good-humour and generosity, had created a party, so that Mrs. Godley suddenly found herself making her famous cakes, preparing cold chickens, and seeing whether there was enough Moselle for the cup.

She knew that there would be 'a few friends,' and then that would mean that the house would be filled with people. Friends brought other people whom the Godleys had never seen in their lives before: 'Oh, of course you can come; they are the best-natured people in the world; they always have heaps of food and drink, and we dance a bit and you can play cards if you like. You'll like them.' And the friends brought by the friends

always did like the Godleys, and determined in their own minds that they would come again.

The house was big enough for any number of people — a large rambling place with a bit of garden both in front and behind, on the left of Putney Hill, not far beyond The Pines, where the famous poet, Mr. Swinburne, once used to live. The Godleys had been in this house for twenty years. All the children had been born in it, except Tracy, who, oddly, had suddenly appeared at Bournemouth. Magdalena, the oldest Godley girl, was now nineteen years of age, and looked on the house as her own. There were six Godley children, and they all looked on the house as their own; the only people who did not seem really to possess it were Mr. and Mrs. Godley.

Mrs. Godley was a handsome woman, in spite of her six children, and her only drawback was that she was broad and not very tall. She had jet-black hair, the most beautiful black eyes, and a lovely skin. She was gay and unselfish and sentimental. Tom Godley was fair, but had something of his wife's figure, thick and short. He was one of those human beings who had been always so good-natured that everyone took his good-nature for granted. He was patronized by everybody, very much including his own family — not because he was weak or silly, but because he never lost his temper and agreed always with anyone rather than have a row. He was a chartered accountant with a most excellent business, and in addition to this, an old aunt who had loved him had left him a very considerable sum of money, so that the Godleys

were well-off and did not have to stint themselves for anything.

They were all clever children. Magdalena was at home; two of the boys were at Harrow; Sylvia had just gone to Roedean; and the youngest, Bobby, aged eight, was at home. However, they were all six at home now, because it was only a week before Christmas.

The house was pandemonium from early morning till late at night, but everybody liked it to be pandemonium. The Godleys had always been accustomed to a great deal of noise, and they were all physically so well and good-natured that all the noises they made were pleasant ones. The quietest of them was Tom Godley himself. Miss Brent, a very old friend of the family, always said, 'Tom Godley isn't what you think. He's got a noisy lusty family, so he sees to it that he is noisy and lusty too, but he isn't so by nature. If he had had different children you would have been surprised. I know what I'm talking about.'

Miss Brent always ended her sentences with this statement, and nobody ever contradicted her. She once said to Mrs. Godley:

'Do you think Tom likes the sort of life he leads?'

'What a question!' said Mrs. Godley. 'Why, of course he does.'

'I'm not so sure. Don't you ever go away with him alone anywhere?'

Mrs. Godley laughed. 'Alone? Why, how could we be alone? We could never have a chance, even if we wanted to.'



Miss Brent sniffed. She left Mrs. Godley a little uncomfortable. That was her way with people. And so, a little later, Mrs. Godley said to her eldest daughter, Magdalena:

‘Tell me, Maggie, darling, you don’t think there’s anything the matter with Father, do you?’

Magdalena was like her mother in colour and spirits, but she was tall and quite distinctly bossy. All her nineteen years she had liked to manage people, and she discovered very early in her life that nine out of ten human beings had no very clear idea as to what they wanted to do or where they wanted to go, so that she had her way with whomsoever she willed. She was always very charming; she never lost her temper; she laughed a great deal.

‘But of course you are coming,’ she would say. ‘Nonsense. Now you be here at ten sharp.’ And the person in question always was. She was practical and full of common sense. If she had a fault, it was that she lacked the softer qualities, once supposed to be charming in a woman. She was inclined to shout; she played all games very well; she was very good when people were ill, and no trouble was too much for her to take; she had limitless energy.

Tom Godley went to the parking-place for his car that afternoon and noticed two things: one, that he was a little irritable; the other, that it was a most beautiful day — sharp, frosty, with a brilliant blue sky. He got his car and started off for Putney, and wondered why he was irritable.

He snapped at somebody who tried to cut in, and suddenly realized that he did not want a party that evening. This was strange, because he had always wanted what his children wanted; but he remembered now that in his childhood he had always hated parties.

How different, then, he had been! A shy, rather retiring little boy, fond of reading, liking to watch the habits of birds, going off for afternoons by himself to fish in the river beyond the old house in Wiltshire where his parents lived. He had cherished great dreams in those days. He was going, he thought, to be a poet. At this recollection — something about which he had not thought for many, many years — he laughed aloud. Tom Godley a poet! How everyone would mock him if they knew.

He had gone to Harrow, like his boys after him, and then, because he played cricket well and was a friendly kind of boy, life had swept him on its jolly course. It had been so easy to be good-natured with everybody. He had good brains, plenty of common sense, and it had been borne in on him that it was a good thing to make money. Why it was a good thing he had never been quite sure, except that if you had money you had power and could get anything you wanted.

What was the matter with him today? He was suddenly wondering whether he had had everything he wanted. He had been passionately in love with his wife and she with him, and he was thinking now of the honeymoon that they had had at Plimpton-on-Sea. They had been married

early in December, and for some fantastic reason had had their honeymoon at an empty hotel on the south coast. There had been gales, the hotel had been desolate, and that week was the happiest of the whole of his life. For years now he had not thought of it, and he did not suppose that Mary, his wife, had thought of it either.

It seemed to him now on looking back that he had never really been alone with his wife since that first week, but the first year of their marriage had been a very happy one. Even then, because they were good-natured people, friends had begun to gather round them, and by the time Magdalena had appeared there was a lot of pleasant noise and laughter. Laughter!

He was nearly home now, held up by the lights. But while he sat there, staring at the broad, self-satisfied back of a large car in front of him, he thought how silent that first week of his marriage had been. Only the roll of the sea.

He saw again as though it were still happening — as indeed perhaps it was — the long empty passages of the hotel; Mary and himself starting out from their bedroom to go down to dinner; not a sound anywhere and not a soul in sight; and then that long dining-room spawned with little empty tables, and the old stout waiter with the charming eyes and snub nose, to whom Mary had taken such a liking. Yes, those long empty passages and Mary, proud of her new evening frock, but with no one to whom she could show it except the old waiter and Tom himself. How deeply, deeply they had loved one another, moving, one enchanted

radiant soul, two made into one by sheer happiness and their joy surrounded by this silence. And ever since then, it seemed to him, there had been nothing but noise.

Not that he disliked noise, for he was a jolly, companionable man; but the noise somehow kept him away from Mary. It was as though, for years now, they had scarcely been able to hear one another speak. From the first thing in the morning, when the children invaded their bedroom, to the last thing at night, when he was generally too tired to do more than snort, give her a kiss and fade into sleep. From early morning to late at night they were separated, he and Mary, by noise.

He was driving in now through the gates up to the house, and he saw that two or three cars were already collected there. He opened the door with the hope that he would be able to slip up to his dressing-room and have a bath without having to speak to anybody; but in the hall there was old Plunket, always the clown of the party and delighted to be so, who was wearing a cook's cap made of paper on his head, and carrying in one hand a false nose. On the stairs was sitting a young girl simply screaming with laughter, and a moment later Magdalena herself appeared. She kissed him.

'Hallo, Dad. You're a bit late, aren't you?'

'No,' he said feebly, starting up the stairs.

'I don't think so.'

'Oh, but you are. Disgraceful! Now hurry up, you mustn't keep everybody waiting, as you did last time.'

'I didn't know anybody ever waited for any-

body else in this house,' he answered quite crossly, and was aware that she was staring up the stairs after him as much as to say, 'Well, what's taken the old boy tonight?'

Lying in his bath, although the door was closed, he heard very clearly noises from all over the house. Somebody seemed to be practising on a saxophone; there were shouts of laughter. The bedroom door opened, and then the bathroom door ever so slightly, and Mary's brilliant black eyes peered round at him.

'Oh, you're in your bath. That's right, don't be long.'

'Hi, wait a minute.' She would have gone if he had not stopped her. 'Why this infernal hurry? I thought the party didn't begin till nine or later.' He saw the round, beloved face through the steam. She answered, laughing:

'Oh, you know they come any time. There are about eight of them here now. I must go. I have a thousand things——'

He quite barked at her.

'Look here, that's all rot; everything can wait. Why shouldn't you and I have a word or two?'

'I can't. . . .'

'Yes,' he said firmly. 'Wait in there, and I'll be with you in a moment.'

As he dried himself hurriedly he wondered what he was going to say to her; he hadn't the least idea; he only knew that he was profoundly irritated. In their bedroom he confronted her in his dressing-gown, and looking, for some odd

reason, with the greatest distaste at his stiff white shirt and black clothes laid out on the bed. His hair was all ruffled and standing on end. As she looked at him she thought at one and the same time how much she loved him, and of whether the fruit salad really had enough wine in it or possibly too much.

'You are looking at me,' he said angrily, 'but you're not thinking about me. There's nothing more insulting.'

'I *am* thinking about you. How funny you are this evening! What's the matter?'

'The matter?' he growled. 'Nothing. But what do we have to have a party for every night?'

'Of course we don't have a party every night.'

'We do,' he answered, 'this time of the year.'

'Oh, well,' she said, 'it's nearly Christmas.'

'I can't hear myself speak for the noise,' he grumbled.

'Tom, how funny you are! You've always loved the parties.' Then she bustled to the door. 'Well, anyway, I must be going. There are a thousand things——,' she said again, and vanished.

'There are a thousand things,' he repeated to himself peevishly, 'but there oughtn't to be. It's always the same whenever I come home. For one reason or another she and I are prevented from really being together at all.' As he fastened his studs into his shirt he wondered why it was that now he was so persistently haunted by this memory of the first week of their married life — the cold silence, the pounding of the sea, the old waiter with the kind eyes and the pug nose. What *was* the

matter with him? He really had not thought of this for years.

Yes, the house was bulging with people. The Godleys always said to anybody, 'Oh, you can go all over the place, anywhere you like, there's nothing private in *this* house.' And so everybody did go everywhere, shouting and laughing and knocking one another about.

'What I like,' old Miss Royce was saying to Mary Godley, who was attempting that difficult task of attentive patience to a guest while at the same time longing to be elsewhere, 'what I like is the spirit of Christmas. Now I may be old-fashioned, though I don't think I am, but I love to see young people enjoying themselves just as they did in Dickens's day.'

'Oh, yes, so do I,' agreed Mrs. Godley, and then calling, 'Magdalena—— One moment, Miss Royce, would you forgive me? Maggie, darling, who are those three funny-looking people in the doorway?'

'Oh, those,' said Magdalena, looking at three people, two very thin and one very fat, standing at the door as though they wondered whether they had come to the wrong house. 'They are some friends of Frank's. He met them at the seaside somewhere and asked them to come, and now he's forgotten their names and doesn't like to ask them — so stupid, because they won't mind being asked.'

Then Mr. Plunket, the clown, appeared, followed by a procession of half a dozen people

playing on combs and other instruments. He was wearing his cook's hat and swinging a cane, like the leader of a military band. He was so happy that it did your heart good to see him; and yet, somehow, on this particular evening, it did not do Tom Godley's heart any good at all. He noticed the three desolate people standing by themselves. He turned to his wife.

'Who are they?' he asked her.

'I don't know, darling. They are friends of Frank.'

'They don't look very happy. What's their name?'

'I don't know.'

He was growing more and more irritable.

'Well, ask somebody.'

'But nobody knows.'

'What! Nobody knows? Guests in our own house!'

'Oh, well, you know how it is — somebody brought them.'

He could not explain himself, but the sight of those three melancholy people there by the door simply infuriated him. How monstrous to have guests in your house and not to know their names, and no one to introduce them to anybody! He went over to them.

'How are you? I am delighted to see you,' he said.

The girl of the little party was a giggling, nervous creature of the type that has all her life longed for love and never found it. So over and over again she is determined to be charming and



over and over again she fails. She giggled at Tom Godley and looked at him with beseeching eyes.

'Oh, thank you, thank you. We're so pleased to have come — most delightful. I do love a party, and in such a beautiful house.'

He looked at her almost sternly.

'Forgive me,' he said, 'but which of my children was it? Which of them is your particular friend?'

'Oh, Frank,' she answered. The two young men, apparently her brothers, stood there like automata. They were opening their mouths and staring straight in front of them. 'We met Frank at Eastbourne last summer, didn't we, Percy?'

'We did,' said Percy.

'He was so kind, so very kind; and then Percy saw him in Harrods the other day, and he invited us, and here we are. That's how it was, wasn't it, Percy?'

'That's how it was,' said Percy.

Tom's rage — inconsequent, illogical, yet stronger than anything he had known for many a day — increased and increased within him. He called out, 'Frank!' Frank, laughing very much at somebody's joke, came over.

'Hallo, Dad.'

'Here are your friends,' he said, and his eyes were so angry that Frank stared at him in surprise. 'Take them round and introduce them.'

Frank led them away, the girl talking at the top of her voice in a high shrill note.

'That's what it has come to, has it?' Tom thought. 'Here in my own house. People we

don't know, who look about them as though they were lost.'

Everyone was going in to supper, and he found himself with little Miss Royce hanging on his arm. He tried to pay attention to her, but his mind was entirely elsewhere. She at least was happy.

'Oh, dear, how I love a party, more and more, I think, as I get older. All these young people so happy, and you and Marv so kind and good, dear Tom.'

'Are we?' Tom said. They were involved in a crowd at the door of the dining-room. 'How are we kind and good? I'm not.'

Miss Royce looked at him nervously. Life was only possible for her on terms of perfect accord. Everyone must be good, noble, generous, patriotic, loving their wives, parents and children, speaking well of everybody; otherwise she seemed to be looking down into a large black pit into which she was presently to fall. So that when she saw Tom Godley was out of spirits and, indeed, looking as though he hated everybody in the room, she looked round hurriedly for somebody who was finding life pleasant, and there was Mrs. Payton, large and stout and garrulous, and so stupid that she was always happy and found everybody perfect. So Miss Royce delicately disconnected herself from her host and greeted Mrs. Payton, and together they loudly chanted hosannahs.

The noise in the room was terrific, and so it ought to be if you are really enjoying your supper.

Tom Godley stood there, his mind intensely fixed upon his wife. What mad thing was happening to him? Why was it that this evening he had this fresh, vivid, almost melodramatic vision? Vision of what? Why, that he loved his wife, and had been remote, removed from her for over twenty years. He was looking at her across that crowded room as though he had lost her, or more, as though he hadn't seen her for twenty years.

How beautiful she was! What a darling in goodness and unselfishness! But how weak, too, to submit herself to this rapacious family. He looked at his children pushing about the room, as though he hated them. He was known as one of the best fathers in England; he had done everything for his children and now he hated the very sight of them! It was they who were responsible for all this noise, for bringing all these queer, unnecessary people into his house, above all, for separating him from his beloved Mary — and especially Magdalena. He watched her tall, determined, bright, definite figure going in and out, talking first to one and then to another, saying the right thing to everybody, a sort of perpetual chairwoman of an eternally responsive committee. How had he ever allowed her to become so efficient? How dreadful — this sort of impersonal goodness. And then the sweep of the human tide drove her close to him.

'Hallo, Dad,' she cried, rather as though in a hunt she had just caught sight of an unexpected fox. 'Why aren't you eating anything? Why aren't you helping somebody to get something?

Come on, Dad, do your job.'

How awful, how terrible! His own beloved, adored daughter, and he could have struck her in the face.

'Being a bit energetic, aren't you?' he said. They happened to have been dropped into a kind of quiet little pool away from the swirling scene in a corner on the right of the sideboard. Magdalena looked at her father sharply.

'Now, look here, Dad, what's the matter? Are you tired, or what?'

He regarded her coldly. 'Why should anything be the matter?'

'Well, you're spoiling all the fun. You look as though you hated everybody.'

'And so I do,' he said softly, 'except your mother. Do you know, Magdalena, I haven't seen your mother for twenty years.'

'Oh, don't talk such rot,' she answered quickly. She didn't like subtleties. 'Come on, get busy.'

He looked at her. 'If you aren't careful,' he said between his teeth, 'you'll get the shock of your life.' He moved away, seized now only by the necessity of detaching Mary from this horrible crowd.

She was standing near the supper-table, talking to funny Willy Plunket, who had got his false nose on now and, with a plate of salad in one hand and a glass of drink in the other, was giving his famous imitation of Jack Buchanan making love to Elsie Randolph. This was clever of him, because he was so crowded by the people, but nothing deterred him when he was really in the mood.

The awful thing about Willy Plunket was that he was always in the mood.

Mary Godley, her black eyes shining, her face flushed, her hair a little disordered, was talking to five people at once.

'Oh, Willy, you'll kill me. Marvellous, isn't he, Miss Royce? Marvellous, isn't he, Emily? No, dear, I haven't seen that yet: the last thing we went to — what *was* it? I can't remember the name, but I know it was about a lot of children who were rude to their parents and then the parents scored in the end. You know the kind of play. Yes, that's my Magdalena, she's such a joy.'

Tom called over the heads of about twenty people, 'Mary, Mary.' She looked up, laughed, and waved her hand.

'Hallo, Tom.'

'Mary, I want you for a moment.'

'All right, I'm coming. Well, Emily, I can't be sure. What's the thirteenth — a Thursday? Of course, Thursday afternoons are always rather difficult because ——'

'Mary, Mary,' Tom called again. His voice was shaking.

'All right, Tom, I'm coming.' She turned round and started towards him, and then it was almost a nightmare the way she was interrupted. One person after another wanted to talk to her. Some elderly woman, with a nose like a boathook, began to lecture her about something; Tom caught the high penetrating voice:

'All the same, Mrs. Godley, I told them I would have to speak to you about it. After all,

you are on the Committee, and it's one of the most important meetings we have ever had. I know you'll make an effort. You have been so good in the past, and I couldn't bear to think that you were going to desert us now just when we need ——

Then Tom Godley did a dreadful thing. He caught the lady — whom he didn't know in the least — by the arm, drew her aside, looked his wife straight in the face, and said, 'I want to speak to you — it's important.' Her face became grave; she had never seen him look like this before.

'All right, I'm coming,' she said.

They threaded their way through the crowd, paying attention to nobody, and reached the empty hall. From the dining-room the noise of the voices was like the murmur of the wind rising in the trees. Suddenly it seemed to Mary, she didn't know why, ominous. There was something the matter with Tom.

'What is it?' she said. 'Are you ill?' He looked at her, and his round, rosy face broke into smiles.

'No, I'm not ill. Go upstairs to your room.'

'Go up to my room?'

'Yes, do you mind?'

'Mind? Why, of course I mind. I can't leave everybody.'

'Yes, you can. That's exactly it.'

'Tom, what on earth is the matter with you? I'm sure you are ill.'

'Perhaps I am. Go up to your room.'

‘ Well, if you have got something to say, for a moment.’

She went up the stairs and he followed her. Once in their bedroom he shut the door. There was now absolute silence.

‘ What’s the matter?’

‘ Put some things in your bag — we’re going away for a night or two.’ She stared at him, her mouth a little open.

‘ Tom, are you mad?’

‘ Not at all.’ He laughed grimly. ‘ You and I, Mary, have been to plays lots of times where exactly this happens. A browbeaten little husband rebels and sends all his family to hell.’

She still stared at him in a kind of trance. ‘ But you’re not browbeaten. You can do anything you like with any of us.’

‘ Yes, and that’s exactly why I’m going to do what I like with you. My eyes have suddenly been opened. I’ve just had a revelation like Moses or Jacob — somebody in the Bible.’

Then she tried to pull herself together.

‘ Now that’s enough, Tom. You’re tired. I must go back to those people. I must.’

‘ Oh no, you’re not going back to anybody except me. We’re going to catch a train. I know there’s one about 11.45 — it’s one of the late trains to Eastbourne and it stops at Plimpton. I went down to Eastbourne by it last year, and I remember it stopped at Plimpton.’

‘ Plimpton?’

‘ Yes, Plimpton. You’ve probably forgotten the name of the place, but we went there once.’

'Plimpton? Now? In this weather? Just before Christmas?'

'Yes, it'll be cold. We must take some warm things.'

Then he suddenly swung on her quite ferociously.

'Pack,' he said.

He looked at her for a moment, to see whether she would rebel, and saw her standing there in a kind of trance, and he knew that it was safe, so that he went into his own dressing-room and began to put some things into a bag. He heard a knock on the bedroom door, and Mary's voice, so he went back, holding a pair of pyjamas in one hand. Magdalena was standing there.

'Here, what's up?' she said. 'What on earth are you two doing?' She looked at them both; then, important, bossy, stiff, straightened her tall slim body. 'Whatever are you doing with those pyjamas?'

'What we're doing,' said Tom quietly, 'is that we're going away.'

'Going away? Now? Tonight? In the middle of the party?'

'Yes,' Tom said, 'it's because it's the middle of the party that we're going away.'

She looked her father full in the eyes.

'I thought there was something funny about you earlier.'

'There's nothing funny about me,' Tom said, 'except that I have not seen enough of my wife lately.'

Then Mary suddenly sat down on the bed and



burst into tears; it was years since she had cried. Magdalena went over to her and put her arm round her.

'Aren't you being a bit of a brute, Dad?' she said. 'I didn't know you bullied Mother. I might tell you that husbands and fathers behave like this only in plays.'

'Yes,' he said, smiling, 'so I've been explaining to your mother. But for once in real life it's fact.' Then he turned on his daughter really as though he loathed her. 'This is something, Magdalena, you can't do a thing about. I know you've imagined for years that you are equal to any situation. I know you think you run this house and this family. I know it's largely due to you that your mother and I have seen nothing of each other for ages past. It's largely due to you that our home is filled with people we don't even know the names of.'

'I'll tell you something more: ever since the war was over people of my generation have been taught to admire your generation to the limit. We don't need to be taught, as a matter of fact. I think your generation is grand; I think the world's yours and it's right it should be, but we older people have lost something enormously valuable by giving in to you so much. We have every bit as much right to our lives, our peace, and everything that's good for us as you have to all the things *you* want; but we've been giving them up steadily all the time until at last, now, we've kept almost nothing. We've paid you compliments long enough. Now get out; look after your

guests. Your mother and I will be back in about three days' time.'

Magdalena patted her mother's shoulder: 'Darling, darling, don't cry. Come down with me and leave him to his funny ideas.'

But Mary, mopping her eyes, said, 'I don't know what's the matter with him, but I can't leave him like this. He's right about one thing, Magdalena; there are things in our relationship to one another — his and mine, I mean — that you don't understand.'

Magdalena got up and, to her father's surprise, her eyes, too, were full of tears.

'I'm not what you think,' she said to him. 'I've known that for a long time,' and she went out.

They sat alone in a first-class carriage that was full of draughts and smelt dimly of drainage. The train was steadily moving through a world of pitch blackness and desolation. They sat opposite to one another.

'You know,' Mary said coldly to him, 'I suppose you think you're very clever, but I'll never forgive you for this — never.'

'If,' he said, smiling across at her, 'that means you keep me constantly in mind, Mary dear, I shall be more than satisfied.'

After a little while, she said again, 'I just don't understand it. There we have been for years going along perfectly happy, always together. You had everything you wanted. You've quite suddenly gone crazy.'

'We haven't been always together,' he replied, 'and I didn't have all that I wanted, nor did you.'

She became a little hysterical again. 'But what do you expect to get out of this? That other time —' she hesitated, her voice dropped a little, 'we were in love, we didn't know one another, it was all mysterious. I don't say,' she went on hurriedly, 'that this isn't better than that was. We've got friendship and companionship now. That other thing we had then — we'll never get that again, nobody does.'

He leaned over and touched her knee with his hand.

'Don't analyse it. It's very simple: I want to be alone with you a little and I want to be quiet.'

'Quiet,' she said, with an excited laugh. 'It'll be quiet enough — that hotel in the middle of the winter!' She began to cry again. 'It's dreadful. I feel as though you were someone different. I don't know you at all.'

'That's funny,' he answered. 'You've just been saying it was silly for us to do this because now we knew each other so well.'

When the train stopped at Plimpton, nobody got out but themselves. An icy blast was driving down the platform. There was one taxi waiting outside. They got into it. They did not speak a word during the drive. Inside the hotel a yawning young man said that of course they could have any bedroom that they liked. Yes, a suite if they preferred it. He was so unutterably bored that

he did not attempt the usual hotel manœuvres.

‘Hotel full?’ Tom asked him, quite merrily.

‘Oh, no, I wouldn’t say exactly full,’ the young man replied. ‘Christmas, you know, in a week’s time. Then there’s plenty going on.’

They went up to their suite, which was vast, prepared, apparently, for royalty whose taste was not immaculate. Tom drew back the curtain and opened the window. A great gust of cold wind came in, and with it the thundering, pounding roar of the sea.

‘Oh, don’t,’ she cried. ‘Tom!’ He came across to her, put his arms round her, drew her head back and kissed her.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘listen.’

She did not move. With the sound of the sea there was the strange, beating rhythm of all the powers of the earth. The air was icy cold, but with it there was a fresh tang of some scent that was indeed far from spring. But it had in it a strange promise and anticipation.

There was no one in the world but themselves; all the noisy complications that her life had for so long been making round her were in one moment swept away. She turned, and, lifting up her face, kissed him. She saw them, the two of them, not twenty years ago, but actually now, racing one another as they had done once along the firm, hard sweep of the sand, while the grey clouds were piled like smoke on the horizon and the seagulls screamed, swooping above their heads. She felt his body as part of hers, his strength and odd manly care for her, his passion and uniqueness.

‘ I think you were right,’ she whispered. ‘ And now, close the window.’

He went across and closed it, and turning back, had such a look of happiness on his face that he did indeed seem to her someone quite new. She realized, with a sudden deep tenderness for him, that he had not looked like that for twenty years.

# THE PERFECT CLOSE



## THE PERFECT CLOSE

OLD Paul Thomlinson was eighty-nine years of age, and everyone in his circle watched him eagerly to see whether he would capture ninety. Once, and not so long ago, it had been hoped that he would reach one hundred, and his sister, Ada Mailey, had very confidently promised it. She was supposed to have been so completely in control that she could surely manage his age as well as everything else. But maybe, in this particular respect, she was not altogether whole-hearted, for, although the old man was not at all a trouble, it would quite certainly be easier for her when her brother was gone. He would leave her the house, a tidy bit of money, and all the odds and ends. Her son, Morgan, would also benefit.

Paul Thomlinson was a very nice, clean old gentleman; a faint, pale shell, but a shell with fire burning inside it. Behind the delicate, almost intangible, age-washed mask you could see the glow and feel the heat. He was no trouble at all. He slept and passed the day in his library, a big, wide-windowed room on the second floor, with books, seventeenth and eighteenth century for the most part, reaching to the ceiling, a fine portrait of his grandfather in a red tortoiseshell frame, an



atlas in old dark oak bound round with brass, a bright-green inkstand, and his dear old dog, Caesar. In his dark-red leather armchair he sat, a rug over his knees, and looked out to the garden, with the Cathedral towers, ancient, beneficent, and the colour of bird's-nest grey, looking over the old brick wall. He saw the swifts cutting the sky like messengers and, when the weather was warm and the windows open, he could smell the roses and the pinks.

He was very little trouble, but he did hold himself aloof. That was what his sister and her son Morgan felt. For, as Mrs. Mailey herself, a thin but friendly lady of seventy, said:

'It's as though he thought himself superior.'

But, then, his mother had thought *herself* superior. Paul and Ada's father had been twice married, Paul the child of one mother, Ada of another. Paul's mother had been remote, reserved, austere. Ada's had been everybody's friend. Ada herself was everybody's friend, and when, after Mailey's sudden death from heart-failure in a London restaurant, she had come with her baby boy to live in Polchester, she had known, in a lick of the thumb, everyone in Polchester worth knowing. Paul had been kind and generous. Ada had run the house and also, as it seemed to the world, her brother. But this last, as Ada had well known, was not the truth. She had never possessed, or even controlled, her brother. It had simply been that he had not wished to take the trouble to resist her about the unimportant things. So long as he had his books, his few friends, the

Cathedral music and his summer trip abroad he had made no fuss. And, oh yes, his dog! There had always been a dog. Of his interest in women, Ada knew nothing — perfect discretion, at any rate in Polchester, whatever his annual trip abroad may have included.

He had been a handsome man, brown-haired, straight-backed, with rather gentle and easily amused eyes and a most distinguished mouth. He wore elegant clothes, liking them coloured, a bright-blue tie, a buff-coloured waistcoat. He had the shining cleanliness of Venetian glass. Well, here he was, a very old man indeed, and quite suddenly, on a late autumn afternoon in his library, he knew that he was going to die.

The knowledge came to him as though a bird from heaven had flown in through the closed and heavily curtained windows and whispered in his ear. In the light given by the sharp-flamed fire and the sheltered electric glow, he almost fancied that he saw the bird.

‘Within an hour or two you’re going to die. Within an hour or two you’re going to die.’

He smiled to himself and laid on the little table at his side the volume of Dryden’s prose that he had been reading. So it had come at last! He had no pain — simply a quick access of weakness. It was as though he could see, through the glass-like shell of his body, the life force ebbing away. He knew that many old people had these alarms, and that, very often, they were false and meaningless scarings. But, this time, he had no doubt. He was in no way frightened. All his life, like

every other human being, he had speculated on death. A child is immortal, for, during childhood, death is an incredibility. Maturity makes it the only certainty. Paul had loved life so intensely that death had seemed to him, for many years, an almost unbearable shame. Very simple things had always pleased him — light and dark, colours and scents, food and drink, friendship. His deeper experiences, hospital work in France during the war, love, once, twice, thrice — these had made death more understandable. They had gone to the roots of experience. But why should he not be permitted to watch the sunlight, keep company with his books, walk with his dog, enjoy the blessed indulgence of sleep, for ever and ever? Of these he would never tire and indulging in them did no one any harm.

For a long time he had resented death. Then, as experience had gathered with the years, he had turned more to wonder as to how he would meet it when it came. He did not fear it. The only thing of which he was really afraid was long-continued physical pain. Once he had suffered acute arthritis in his left arm for a continuous six months and had realized, through that experience, how pain that never relaxes can do something to the spiritual side of man, something disgraceful and humiliating. If he knew that he was to die, would he be a coward? He often pictured to himself that familiar scene in the consulting-room, he seated, listening attentively to the surgeon's sentence of death. That sudden realization of death! What a fearful thing! To know that, within a

definite sum of months, you would be removed, extinct, forgotten!

Could he then summon a brave and philosophic serenity? He did hope so.

Then, as the years had passed and he had grown older and older, he had felt, without too much boastfulness, a sort of triumph. He was getting the better of that old devil, Death! Suppose he reached his century — what a snap of the fingers for that old humbug! He was proud of his birthdays and liked them solemnized. On his seventieth he had a great dinner party, with all his friends around him. On his ninetieth, he would have another! Now, this afternoon, he knew very certainly that he would never reach that ninetieth.

Of course, as age had advanced, his vitality had ebbed. This room had become his world, and a very agreeable world too. He slept a great deal, he had still a good appetite, his brain was as active as ever, and he was still able to feel his old energetic likes and dislikes of his fellow human beings. He liked his sister, for old times' sake, although he held the opinion that most men have about most women — that she had little sense of the important things in life. He detested his young nephew, Morgan. He had detested him from the first moment of seeing him, a baby, howling for something, screaming at sight of him. Young Morgan had all the qualities that his uncle most abhorred — he was conceited without reason, cocksure without knowledge, noisy and extravagant. Morgan patronized his old uncle, without

intending it of course, but that only made the patronage worse. He delivered his opinions on politics, the arts, love, religion, as though they were the only possible opinions. He had brains, and would make a good lawyer, but he was a horrible young man. Morgan and his uncle played chess together. Paul was an erratic player and Morgan usually defeated him. Paul hated the boy's supercilious pleasure at his victories, but Paul adored the game and, on every separate occasion, was certain that this time he would trounce the young devil.

And Morgan had a dog, a succession of dogs. Always the same kind of dog — barking, restless, selfish dogs, fox-terriers for the most part. He thought of Morgan's fox-terrier, Satan, the present one, and he motioned with his thin, blue-veined hand to his old Sealyham, Caesar, who, stretched near the fire, apparently sleeping, had nevertheless his eye closely fixed on his master. Caesar came slowly over to him and rested his head against his master's leg, sighing portentous satisfaction as he did so. Caesar, old as he was, could still put fear into the heart of young Satan. A grand fighter Caesar had always been!

So here then was Death, and it was neither terrifying nor humiliating. There was a strange agitation about his heart, as though all the forces there were engaged in a last battle together. His brain was extraordinarily lucid and clear. He seemed to possess a double vision, so that the dark plum-coloured curtains were almost transparent, and the black and white marble slabs of the fireplace

nearly revealed to him the active world moving behind them. Soon he would know — ah, very soon! — the shapes, sounds, and vigours of that second world.

The door opened. It was young Morgan.

‘I like a game of chess, Uncle, before tea?’

‘Now,’ the old man thought, ‘I’m within an hour or less of death. I should be at charity with all the world. But I dislike that young man as much as ever. Why does he speak as though he owns the world? And,’ he thought, ‘if ever in all my life I wanted to beat him at chess, I want to beat him now.’

He was not a bad young man, Morgan. He thought himself irresistibly charming. He was thinking:

‘Poor old boy — and aren’t I a hero to play a game with him?’

He fetched, from a corner of the room, the chessmen. They were a beautiful set of dark-red agate and clear shining crystal. Very handsome they looked, set up there, with the firelight behind them.

‘Red,’ said Morgan.

‘Red it is,’ the old man answered.

Although he wished so eagerly to win, he found it difficult at first to concentrate — and chess demands absolute concentration. Why was it, he thought, that he disliked, almost bitterly, his nephew’s appearance? For he was a handsome young man, hair the colour of ripe corn, blue eyes, a taut, trained, athletic body? The mouth was supercilious, the hands too grasping. . . . Yes, yes.

That was the thing to do. Knight to Bishop Three and then, perhaps, if Morgan had not foreseen . . .

His thoughts were captured with the consciousness of the littleness of time that remained to him. Only an hour or two. . . . What did he wish to do? To win this game of chess. And Minna's dress . . . Before he moved his bishop, he said:

'There isn't a parcel for me downstairs, is there?'

'Didn't see anything. Your move, Uncle!'

Dear, *dear* Minna! Everyone thought her so plain, just a dry, ill-dressed, elderly virgin. But she had been always so very kind to him. There had been between them for so many years a most beautiful relationship. She and the dog Caesar were now everything to him. Yes, now that so many dear others were dead. His mind speculated yet further. Did death mean nothing? Would he, in another brief space of time, be aware of Nothing? Nothing! How appalling a word! But it seemed to him that God was more likely and, if God, why, then surely continuing experience.

'Your move, Uncle.'

With a mighty effort that seemed almost the most strenuous exercise he had ever commanded, he looked at the board. He saw with horror that he was in the greatest danger. Morgan's queen and bishop commanded a line threatening disastrously his king. Every piece of Morgan's — he had the red, sinister, dark, shadowed agate —

seemed to be stirring with menace. His own crystal pieces were, he felt, appealing to him for succour. Oh, he must win this game, he *must* win this, the last game of his life! He glanced at young Morgan's cocky, supercilious smile, at the superior, confident fashion of his seat, his back taut, his thighs spread.

'Take your time, Uncle. . . . Take your time. You're in a bit of a hole.'

Never before had the old man wanted anything so badly as to win this game. No, not when he had gone on his knees to Maria Bock in the restaurant in Heidelberg and implored her mercy; nor when, at the Wagner Festival in Munich, he had hoped that David Warrinder would be his friend.

His long, long past life came together in the effort that now he summoned. His brain, as fine as ever it was, bit into the board. He could feel his heart leap and die, leap and die. He castled, a thing that he should have done before. Young Morgan's knight leapt sideways with a little toss of his sunset-coloured head.

'I must attack,' Paul thought. He brought out his queen.

'Check,' said Morgan with exultation and, his arrogance blinding him, had not seen that the checking knight had fallen into the path of his uncle's bishop. With how quiet a gesture, but with what inner triumph, did Paul remove that knight.

'Damn!' said Morgan, 'I never saw it!'

And then Paul discovered his opportunity. By



moving that pawn, sending forward a bishop, offering that pawn as a sacrifice, he had a chance of a mate. Morgan's castled king was tied in — there was a chance . . . a chance. His brain reeled. If only Morgan were blind enough. He moved his pawn. Morgan threatened his king again. He sent his bishop forward. Morgan, intent on his own triumph, moved his knight. Paul offered his pawn. There was a pause and Morgan, almost sneeringly, took it.

'Checkmate,' said the old man.

Mate in a dozen moves! A really marvellous victory — and he would never play chess again!

'What about another?' said young Morgan, who simply hated to be beaten.

The old man looked at him maliciously.

'No. I'm going to rest on my victory. I was afraid you'd see through that move of mine.'

Morgan said: 'You won't work that on me a second time. Uncle Paul.'

'No. I don't believe I shall.'

'Come on, have another.'

'No. Allow me the satisfaction of telling everyone I've beaten you.'

'Well, you don't often. If it gives you any pleasure——'

What a baby the boy was! The old man felt a sudden affection for him.

'It's very nice of you to come and play with an old man like me.'

Morgan smiled.

'I am *fearfully* busy. But I can always find time for a game.'

'What are you busy about?'

'Work. You know, Uncle, I'm going to be a damned fine lawyer. I feel it in my bones.'

'I expect you are. I hope you'll be a damned fine man too. There are so many lawyers.'

It seemed to him fantastically that the shadow of a man was outlined against the wall. A long-faced, thin shadow, Death no doubt. A friendly fellow.

'All right, Death. Make yourself comfortable. Give me another half-hour.'

He looked at his nephew and thought of his assured self-confidence. Not so had it been with him! Of all the things that he now regretted, the time wasted in placating his fellow human beings was the heaviest. Not that he wished that he had been bad-mannered. He rated courtesy very high. But, when younger, he had credited his companions with more wisdom, more knowledge of the world, than himself. He saw now that they had all been as stupid as he. He had been sensitive to their criticism, but now he realized that, when they criticized him, they were defending themselves. The distinguishing mark between people was kindness of heart, generosity of spirit, not wisdom. And so he thought again of Minna Prinsep.

'Be a good boy, Morgan, and run down and see whether there isn't a parcel for me.'

'All right — if you really won't play another game.'

The boy went out and the old man grinned at Death against the wall.

'I beat him at chess. That's grand.'

He felt quite wonderfully cheerful. The room, and the house behind it, seemed filled with all the fun they'd had — and especially the Christmas parties. Ada had been good about those parties and, even into his very last year, the music and the dancing, the supper, the mistletoe, the holly, had all been rich with goodwill and friendliness. On this very last Christmas, Minna had thought only for him.

'I think you ought to know,' she had said, 'that I never can thank you enough for all your goodness to me.' She had spoken in her dry, rather sarcastic voice that frightened some people. She was terribly poor and terribly brave. He thought that sometimes she did not have enough to eat. And then, a month ago, he had found her looking at a catalogue. There was a dress that she coveted.

'I'm no beauty, you know, but in *that* I might look quite attractive.'

She had sighed and put the dress catalogue away. And the other day he had written to London for it. If only it would arrive this afternoon!

'Do you think . . . ?' he asked Death tentatively. But he knew that it was of no use to ask Death for anything. Death had his orders.

So he settled himself comfortably in his chair and considered, without any fear or discomfort, this ebbing of his vitality. He had always considered the two possibilities — death under anaesthetic or dope of some sort — and death with him-

self fully conscious. The second of these would be surely most dreadful — the struggle *not* to die, *not* to surrender.

On the contrary, the approach, as he was now experiencing it, was one of the most pleasant he had ever known. It was not only easy and practicable, but it seemed like a real going forward to some agreeable experience. Friends, in earlier days, had fetched him to take him away for the week-end.

‘Wait a minute,’ he had called, ‘I will be with you in a minute.’ So now.

‘Wait a minute, Death. I’m nearly ready.’

He noticed that Caesar had come very close to him and, once and again, shivered. Was he aware, as dogs are supposed to be aware, that Death was in the room? Never mind. The old dog would soon himself be gone. What a pleasant fancy that they might share together the Elysian fields!

The door opened.

‘There is a parcel!’ Morgan cried. ‘Here it is!’

‘Let’s see it.’ The old man raised his thin hand, almost like talc against the fire-light. ‘Give me those scissors. The large ones over by the window. . . . Here, you cut it. Open it for me.’

‘Why, it’s a dress!’

Morgan examined it.

‘Nice stuff — but pretty severe. Mother likes bright colours.’

‘I know she does. No, this is for someone else.’

'You dark horse! Giving dresses to the ladies!'

The boy was at his *most* irritating, for behind his sentences was plainly the conviction that he was the most enchanting of young men, tender with the aged, humorous about sex, wise about women. . . .

'Don't talk to me about ladies!' the old man snapped at him. 'Why, at your age, I knew already more than you'll ever know.' He winked at Death across the room, as much as to say:

'I know that in this last hour of mine I should be gentle, at peace with all men, unconscious of malice. . . . I'm afraid to the very last I shall be myself.'

It annoyed him to see Morgan fingering the dress.

'All right. . . . Leave it. There! on the table. . . .'

Then, as though to himself:

'I wonder if Minna Prinsep will look in!'

Morgan shouted with joy.

'Minna! Why, of course, how stupid! Old Minna! That's who the dress is for! Why didn't I think of it?'

'That's enough! That's enough! Leave me to myself now — that's a good boy — I'll have a nap before tea.'

He felt a tenderness to the boy again. After all, this child was at the beginning of life's experience, and he was at the end. How little, how very little he had to tell him! Be tolerant, realize yourself as a comic figure, expect no great things either

of yourself or others, physical love does not last but spiritual love may, accept the inevitable egotism of all humans save the saints, take joy in little things, do not grieve overmuch for sins of the body, but fight like the devil against mean-nesses of the spirit — oh, what use would any of this be to Morgan? An old man's platitudes, they would seem. No one ever learnt anything from the experience of others. He lay back, happy that he would never have to lay down the law about anything again.

He remembered his indignation once, when, at a party, someone had said:

'Constable! Milk-and-water English! Cows and mills and stormy skies! He might have been something of a painter if he hadn't been English!'

How Paul had exploded! How angry he had been, how his heart had hammered in his chest! Now, in retrospect, that scene was a little curl of grey smoke, a breath of air, a rolling beat of a vanishing drum! All angers, all tempestuous judgments, all dismays, betrayals, burning tears — all gone, all as though they had never been!

The door opened and Minna Prinsep stood there. He gazed at her. She seemed for a moment another shadow against the wall, like Death. And then, he was so rapturously delighted. Yes, although vitality was ebbing from him fast, he could still feel rapture of the spirit.

'Minna!'

Her ugly, rather twisted face, illuminated by the beautiful generous eyes, smiled.

'I looked in just to see how you were.'

'Oh, I'm all right.' He was growing weak. He motioned her rather feebly to his side. 'Come over here.'

She came across, moving in stiff awkward jerks her thin, angular body.

'Are you all right? You look rather tired.'

'Of course I am. I beat Morgan at chess this afternoon.'

'You didn't?'

'I did. And in a dozen moves too. Look here — I've got something for you.'

His hands, from which all strength seemed now to be departing, fingered about the tissue paper.

'You take it from the box.'

She lifted it out and held it up.

'Oh! . . . Oh!'

'It's for you. I sent for it from London. If it doesn't quite fit, you can have it altered here.'

'Oh, but it's lovely.' She held the stuff against her thin neck.

'Perfect. You — you darling.'

She let the dress drop, knelt down and kissed his forehead. He put his arm stiffly about her. They had forgotten the dress.

'Why do you do these things for me?'

Her voice broke. He thought she was going to cry.

'No one else in all my life has been good to me as you have. I've never loved anyone so much——'

'Nor have I. There *is* a love you know, Minna, deeper and deeper — not physical.'

‘Yes — ours will last for ever. It has made me believe in immortality.’

His happiness was complete. As he lay there, his hand against her side, the house was suddenly filled with sound. The Christmas party. He was moving down the stairs. In his nostrils was the scent of burning candle-wax, sugar icing, the cold woody chill of mistletoe berries, the hot crackle of holly. Beyond the window were carol singers, and someone was taking the parcels from the tree. . . .

He was hand in hand with Death, and Death’s grasp was warm and comforting.

‘Now this is perfect!’ he cried, and all the candles blazed and the coloured balls swung gallantly on the tree.

Minna looked up into his face and gave a cry.





# SERVICE FOR THE BLIND



## SERVICE FOR THE BLIND

LILY PENDENNIS was considered, by everybody who counted, the sweetest woman in Polchester. Such a reputation as this is always difficult to acquire and still more difficult to retain. The kindest and most tender-hearted people are apt to jeer at Aristides' justness. But Lily's sweetness no one could deny and, if there were, as there always are, a few cynical, bitter misanthropes who said that 'linked sweetness long drawn out' was as bad as treacle pudding, why, that is always to be found — people, I mean, who do not like treacle pudding.

And, after all, how monstrous a comparison! Lily Pendennis had no resemblance whatever to a treacle pudding! She was slender, with soft brown eyes, lovely brown hair, and a mouth of true tenderness. When that mouth smiled and those brown eyes filled with tears, when her little soft hands trembled in the air with pity, then, as Mrs. Bailey, the old 'toffee-ball' woman who stood at Arden Gate with her basket of sweets and post-cards, said, 'It was like the Mother of God lookin' over the bars of Heaven' — a remark that Bishop Morley, our Bishop at that time and *very* Protestant, would have disliked very much had he heard it.

Lily Pendennis, after the death of her mother, lived with a sort of cook-maid, in a little flat above the book-shop in the High Street. A sign of these odd times, old people said. some of them remembering the long-distant days of Archdeacon Brandon — ‘a very, very different world.’ Yes, very independent and modern, but, in one way and another, Lily was the last woman in the world concerning whose morals you would have any suspicion. And that was odd, because she was pretty; had a beautiful figure; and certainly cared about gentlemen. She cared about them, however, young though she was, in a motherly sort of way. And it is a fact, not very complimentary to men in general, that nothing kills the sensual in them so quickly as feminine offering of the maternal. Lily could not help it. Lame dogs were her passion.

‘I don’t know how it is,’ she would say, her eyes sparkling humorously, ‘but, poor men, they simply *don’t* know how to look after themselves, do they?’

And it was true that, although she was always ‘sweet’ to her own sex, she did not look on other women as ‘lame dogs’ — oh no! quite the contrary.

With all her sweetness and general popularity, Lily was oddly lonely. She had no intimates. She knew everybody, of course, and gave the most charming little tea-parties in her pretty room above the book-shop. How pretty that room was, and really cultured. In the long, low, white bookshelf there were the works of Gals-

worthy and Masfield, Somerset Maugham ('although he *is* cruel to his characters, don't you think? He doesn't love them a bit!') and Margaret Kennedy ('I do love her books. That beautiful one about the musical family'). On the wall were copies of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and a Cézanne still-life of a bottle and a plate of apples. ('As I *can't* afford the originals, I have to have copies. But they are really very good, don't you think?') Her room was coloured blue and white, and her tea-things were blue and white. Traffic in the High Street below made a friendly murmur. From the other window you could see, beyond the town, to the moors.

In some way or other this room, when you entered it, seemed, however brightly the fire was burning, to be cold. Emily Hardcastle, a friend of Lily and also a lady bachelor, had a room that you could not move in because of the things in it. Toby jugs and china plates and pots of flowers and books. 'Dear Emily,' Lily would say, '*what* a jumble!' But Emily's room was warmer.

But, if Lily had no very close friends, she was for ever making them. By that I mean that, if any man in Polchester was in any sort of trouble, there was Lily on his doorstep. Oh, quite nicely! She never offended the proprieties. And then, for a while, this victim of calamity would be in Lily's special care and protection. There was Fred Margesson, who had scalded his hand over a kettle of boiling water, and Mr. Limpus, the organist, who lost his wife so suddenly from pneumonia, and Will Havenant, whose beloved dog was run

over, and Charlie Klein, who crushed his hand in the door of a motor-car. It was certainly a miracle that she had not married one of them, but somehow, as soon as the misfortune was less severe, Lily slipped away or the sufferers slipped away — something seemed to happen. That she *wanted* to be married, no lady in Polchester doubted for a single instant. And why should not she be married? She was pretty, she had considerable means, and was 'simply sweet.' Very mysterious.

One early summer, something occurred in Polchester that excited Lily very much. The Society for the Blind in the South of England had its annual 'week' in Polchester. This was simply a friendly society that existed for the social and happy comradeship of the Blind. Every town had its little group and, once a year, for a whole week, many members went somewhere and had a sort of festival. When Lily heard that they were coming this year to Polchester she cried — she positively cried.

'I just can't bear the thought of it,' she said.  
'I just can't bear it.'

'Well,' said Emily Hardcastle rather dryly, 'they've managed to bear it for a good many years, so I should have thought you could.'

'Aren't you,' said Lily, 'just a *little* unfeeling, Emily? Just a teeny-weeny bit?'

They certainly asked for no pity when they arrived in the town. A more cheerful, independent, self-reliant body of people it would be impossible to find.

When you see, do you not see more vividly

when you are with those who do not see? A fly's wing has its prismatic beauty, and the rough leaf of the primrose a marvellous symmetry. Polchester is a city for the Blind, because the invisible is the important thing there. The Blind suddenly invaded the town. There were seventy or eighty of them in all, young and old, male and female. Some of them had dogs, marvellous creatures, serious, devoted, scornful of the ordinary passer-by who could see and yet did so little with his sight.

Some were in groups of four or five — the same groups throughout the week. There were many guides and helpers, but they seemed to be little used. Within two days of their coming there, the Blind dominated the city. Many people noticed that they seemed to see things that of course they could not see. They stood — or one single person, male or female, stood — on the pavement half-way up the High Street, motionless. People eddied round them, but they were in no one's way. The face was lifted, enquiring, taking in, receiving. It was early summer, and a very fine week of weather. The sun was always shining, the bells always ringing, the flowers scenting the air. Polchester is a town of gardens.

But, for the most part, the Blind seemed to have a passion for the Cathedral, which was remarkable, because the ladders of colour from the stained glass, the pale, pigeon-coloured stone of the great pillars, the tomb of the Black Bishop, the flowers on the altar, the tattered flags, so nobly torn, their faint colours resplendent with glory —



these fine things they could not see. But they would sit quietly on the little cane-bottomed chairs in the nave, the nave that always seemed, in some way, to be bordered with boundless stretches of moss or water; sit very quietly, their heads raised, taking everything in. Or they would walk softly in the aisle, stroking tombs or brasses with their fingers. Best of all, they liked it whenever the organ was practising.

They were no trouble at all, whether indoors or out. Everyone wished to assist them, to explain things, to relate history, to describe. But really they appeared to need very little assistance.

'Why,' thought Lily, 'is it that everyone is so kind and attentive to blind people and so very impatient with the deaf?'

There was Mr. Marlowe, for instance, with his ear-trumper. He had only lately come to Polchester and was as deaf as a haddock, and although everyone was sorry for him, everyone was irritated by him too. When he said, poor man, 'Yes, quite, quite,' as though he had understood, when you knew that he had not understood at all, people just shivered with annoyance. Before the Blind had arrived, Lily had thought that she might show Mr. Marlowe some kindness, but now, of course, she had no time for him. Time! Why, she had only a week and all these poor people needed helping. To be blind! To live in perpetual darkness!

'Oh, Clara,' she said to her maid, 'I can't sleep for thinking of them! To be in this beautiful place and not to be able to see! We ought never

to complain about anything, Clara! We have been so marvellously spared.'

'Yes, Miss,' said Clara, who *had* been complaining about the state of her little kitchen.

'You say, Clara, that you haven't room to move about in. Why, think how terrible if you were blind? What would you do then?'

'Break a lot of things, Miss,' said Clara cheerfully.

But Lily's trouble was — where was she to start? There were so many of them and they all needed her help. In the High Street, she went up to a man and said, ever so sweetly:

'Do let me help you,' and he answered quite sharply:

'No, thanks. I'm quite all right.'

Then, most unexpectedly, came her answer, as though from God. Among the trees, behind the Cathedral — that walk and lovely bank running down to the Pool — she came upon him, standing, leaning against a tree and looking straight in front of him. He was a young fellow, about her own age, squarely built, with sturdy arms and legs, face and hands ruddy-brown in colour. It made Lily's heart ache to think of so splendidly healthy, so young a man, and he blind!

She hesitated. He was so motionless, the sun beating through the trees on to his bare, bullet-shaped head. She looked at him. She yearned over him. She went softly up to him and touched his arm. She said, quite humbly:

'There isn't any way in which I can help you is there?'

He smiled, a beautiful smile of friendly kindness.

'Oh, thank you,' he said, 'I don't need any help.'

'No. I know. But seeing you all alone——'

'A friend is coming back soon to fetch me.'

'Isn't it a lovely day?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'the sun's ever so warm.'

She stood beside him, thinking how strong he was.

'Have you ever been in Polchester before?'

'No. Never. Last year we went to Drymouth for our week.'

'Oh, this is *much* more beautiful than Drymouth.'

'Yes, but there was the sea there. I liked to hear it rolling in.'

'I'm so very sorry you can't see all the lovely . . . ' She pulled herself up abruptly. Silly fool that she was! But he did not mind in the least.

'When you've been blind since a little boy, as I've been, you fancy all sorts of things. Now I know just what these trees are like, although I haven't *seen* a tree for twenty-five years. Perhaps I *see* them even more beautiful than they really are!'

'Oh, perhaps you do. What a beautiful thought!'

'Anyway, I smell them more than people who have their sight. The scent of this bank now' (he stroked it with his fingers), 'you wouldn't believe how beautiful and strong and fresh it is!'

'Do you always live in the country?'

'No, not exactly. I live in Exeter. I'm a masseur.'

'Oh, are you? How *very* interesting!'

'It is really. You meet all sorts of people.' He grinned. 'They tell you all their secrets, but, of course, in a little place like Exeter you probably know them already.' He added: 'I'm very broad-minded.'

'Oh, so am I!' agreed Lily enthusiastically

'What I say is everyone has their own temptations. What is a temptation to one isn't a temptation to another, if you know what I mean.'

'I do indeed.'

'Who are we to judge?' Then he laughed. 'Everyone can't be as lucky as I've been.'

'Lucky!' she exclaimed.

'Well, I've got everything I want in life except a family. I'd like some kids. Oh, I know most people wouldn't call my blindness luck, but I've been blind so long that I think I'd be frightened now if I *could* see. And you can't imagine how kind people are! Just because you're blind there's nothing they won't do.' He put out his hand gropingly. Without a second's pause, she grasped it.

'What a soft hand you've got!' he said. 'We go a lot by hands, you know.'

She was blushing. Her heart was racing. She was in an ecstasy. A moment later, to her grievous disappointment, a man with a black moustache appeared and conveyed her blind friend away.

She had not even asked him his name. But she

was in love — oh, this time, most positively and certainly in love! There had been others for whom she had longed to care but never any like this one! Here was the course of her life at last laid out, plainly and clearly, before her. Someone to protect, to guide, the father of her children (oh, yes, she faced all the facts quite fearlessly!). And then, in old age, how he would depend upon her, need her at every turn! She did not care for Exeter very much — the climate was most relaxing. Still, there would be time to think about that.

Time! Time! Time was the devil. There were only four days remaining. Suppose that she did not see him again! But she *did* see him again — the very next day. At the Service for the Blind in the Cathedral.

This was the great event of the week. There was an augmented choir and a sermon from the Bishop. The service was held in the nave and there was an altar at the foot of the choir steps in front of the choir screen. The altar was covered with flowers. The Blind could not see the flowers, but they smelt them.

The seventy or eighty Blind all sat together in the middle of the nave. The rest of the congregation used the remaining seats in the nave and the choir stalls. Lily was fortunate. (She always got what she wanted. In her own charming fashion she was very determined.) She sat close to the Blind, and only two rows of little cane-bottomed chairs from her friend of the day before. There he was, very upright, his round bullet-head raised, his square back very straight, his brown eyes

staring fixedly. And then Lily had a shock, for next to him a girl was seated and she had a bad strawberry-mark disfigurement down one side of her face.

'Oh, poor girl!' Lily thought. 'Oh, poor girl! To be blind *and* have that disfigurement!' Her heart ached for the poor girl and, at the same time, foolishly forgetting for a moment his blindness, she was thinking that her friend of yesterday was kind to be attentive to the poor girl, as he was, helping her with this and that, offering her little courtesies. That showed, didn't it, what a wonderful character he had?

Possibly to everyone in the congregation, that afternoon, strange things occurred. People who had always supposed that their sight was excellent saw newly, but it was the Blind who saw more than anybody. They had been told, by this time, that there was the famous Rose Window, and that here was this tomb with the figures of wood painted in faded red and blue, here the tomb of the Black Bishop, there the chapel of the War Memorial. . . . They had been told all these things and many more — legends of Saints in heaven and of heroes long dead and flags of old thunder-echoing battles. They were told the stories of the famous riots, when a man from the town had thrown himself from the gallery in the Tower down on to the nave stones, and of how Bishop Kendon had stood in the great West Door and defied the rioters. They were told stories by Mr. Mathews, the vergier, famous for his stories, of Harmer John the Dane, who had been killed down by the river,

whose ghost was supposed to walk the meadows of a summer's eve; they were told of the great Archdeacon Brandon, whose wife had run away with a clergyman. They were told — stories were poured into their ears. They listened and smiled; with some their eyes were closed, with some they were full and radiant, with some they were dull and dead. But, behind those sightless faces, there was a vision more finely coloured, more pulsing with life, than any vision belonging to those who could see. The Blind saw the true Cathedral, the lovely home of the living God.

Lily could only describe her state as that of a heavenly trance. Was she religious? Yes and no. It came and it went. If she was frightened, she prayed. If she was happy, she gave thanks. But there were times, when, for instance, she suffered toothache or one of her neuralgic headaches, when she could *not* believe that there was a God. For, if there were, would He let her suffer? On an occasion like this, she could not doubt. Being rather short-sighted, she *saw* God, in a robe of flame, above the altar. Or was it that the Blind saw God, and influenced her own vision? As the choir, from its hidden distance, sang one of Wesley's most beautiful hymns, she moved with the Blind into that other kingdom, where light is eternal and the angels praise the Lord. Nevertheless, even when she was seeing God, she was also seeing her young handsome friend, considering every inch of him, eagerly thanking something, or somebody, for bringing 'her man' to her at last; and feeling too, although she did not consider

this, that he was fortunate also because his good luck had brought him so good a wife.

Oh yes! A good wife she would be! He should want for nothing, should be cared for every minute of the night and day . . . with a shock, just as the Bishop was pronouncing the Blessing, she was aware that she did not know whether he were married or not. He could not be! He must not be! He had said that about wanting children. Would not his wife be with him, were he married?

And, outside on the Cathedral Green, in the warm evening sunshine, she met him. He was standing between the girl with the disfigurement and the tall, rough-looking man with the black moustache. Suddenly she recognized this last.

‘Why, aren’t you Mr. Blaethorne?’

‘I am, Miss Pendennis.’

Why, of course, it was Blaethorne, the grocer of Tulling Lane.

‘I recognized you yesterday, Miss Pendennis, and didn’t like . . .’

‘Why, of course. How remiss of me! Please forgive.’

Mr. Blaethorne, who was something of a snob, eagerly forgave.

It seemed that Mr. Francis Barty and Miss Ealing were lodging with the Blaethornes during the week.

‘Yesterday,’ Lily said to her dear Mr. Barty, ‘we didn’t have time to exchange names. I’m Lily Pendennis.’

‘And this is Miss Ealing,’ said Mr. Barty.



It was a regrettable fact, and Lily quite consciously recognized it, that she did not feel the same tenderness towards female misfortune as towards male. It needed all her courage to look at Miss Ealing. How fortunate that the poor thing could not see her hesitancy!

'There are very few days left,' Lily said; 'you must let me do what I can. Oh, but I insist! Mr. Barty and I became firm friends yesterday. Now what is your address, Mr. Blaethorne?'

He gave it her.

'Ah, yes, 34 Tulling Lane. Thank you. You'll be seeing me.'

And off she went, head erect, beautiful figure moving with perfect symmetry, and forgetting once again, alas, that dear Mr. Barty could not see.

Next morning she arrived, in her brilliantly red little two-seater, at 34 Tulling Lane and insisted on taking Mr. Barty for a drive. Why, no! Of course it was no trouble. She had *nothing* to do. A lonely old maid like herself. . . .

'I suppose *you're* married, Mr. Barty. . . .'

'No, as a matter of fact. . . .'

'Well, you soon will be, I'm sure. Now come along. I'll take you to a spot on the moors. You can smell the sea. One of my favourite places.'

She imagined, on his part, a certain reluctance. But that was only his manner. Mrs. Blaethorne, a stout, worthy woman, was full of civility. Miss Ealing sat there quietly, her hands folded on her lap.

Once they were outside the town, she felt again that odd sense of being drawn into the world of the Blind, of noticing things, trees, branches, the soft fawn-coloured texture of the road's surface, above all, the sky, where small, light clouds, like paper boats, danced on the watery blue. It was as though she were seeing with *his* eyes! She had never been so happy before and she clothed him with her happiness. He sat there, a smile on his lips, saying very little. She was almost frantically aware of his physical nearness. Her hand was on the wheel, but how it longed, for only a moment, to move and touch his cheek! Her knee, as she changed the gear, for an instant struck his. It seemed to her like a blow. Hurriedly she moved it away, hoping that he had longed for it to remain. How easily, in the first stages of our burning affection, we make our feelings his or hers!

At last she stopped the car, got out, helped him, led him through a little gate, on to the moor. 'There!' she said.

She did not remove her arm, and they stood, side by side. Now she was sure that he loved her, brief though their acquaintance had been. 'Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?' She felt that she was leaning against his sturdy upright body. She felt that he was absorbing her. She felt . . . He began to speak:

'The sea smell is like carnated flowers, isn't it? And I see it rushing up over pebbles, then drawing back and leaving them shining in the sun. Then this moor runs out like a green cloud to the sky.

You can't see a thing between the moor and the sky, can you? Nothing breaks them, I mean. Do you think the sea is blue today, with stretches of purple silk? When I think of those purple patches, it is as though someone had thrown them carelessly on to the sea — not caring where they went. And then I like the smell of tea on the seashore. All the things that go with tea — the kettle boiling, the tea falling into the cup, the jam sandwiches with a little sand on them and that cream you get on your lips. . . . '

Oh, how difficult it was then not to turn and put her arms around him! How difficult! But she was a decent, self-respecting Englishwoman, so she did not, but led him back to the car instead.

After that — what do you think? Lily stayed at the Blaethornes' all day. At the Blaethornes' door was Mrs. Blaethorne — and then Lily must go in — and then Lily must stay to the midday meal. . . .

'I do hope pork doesn't upset your stomach, Miss Pendennis, but it's a fine piece and——'

Lily stayed, and was the life and laughter of the party. She insisted on cutting up Mr. Barty's food for him, and stood over him, resting her hand, almost inadvertently, on his firm, warm shoulder. She could not but fancy that Miss Ealing disliked her. Why should she, when she spoke to her ever so kindly? And, after all, she couldn't see, could she?

Then she carried Mr. Barty off again. This time to the Cathedral, and then, afterwards, in the

scented summer dusk, they stood under the trees above the river — the exact place of their first meeting. Lily spoke quickly, huskily:

‘ This spot will be always sacred to me in a kind of way. I know it sounds so silly, doesn’t it, when we’ve known each other so short a time. But do you know what I think? Time has nothing to do with affection. Do you think it has? What I mean is that some people you know in a minute and other people you’d never know if you knew them for years. Oh, dear, I *am* speaking confusedly, but I’m sure you understand. You *are* so understanding. That’s why I took to you the very first time. I could see that you were. And with your affliction—— ’

‘ It isn’t an affliction,’ he said quietly.

‘ It’s so brave of you to take it that way. I do admire you for it. I’ve got a very soft heart — much too soft, many people say — and it is so often moved. But our friendship has something special about it — and from the beginning, don’t you think so? ’

She paused for a reply.

He said, with his charming, friendly smile:

‘ You’ve been awfully kind to me.’

She drew very close to him. She took his hand.

‘ In spite of all the friends I have,’ she went on, her voice (it had great sweetness) so near to his ear that she almost tickled him, ‘ I’m really a very lonely little person. I need some man to care for me, but, until now, I’ve never seen the one I could care for as one should care for one’s hus-

band.' As he said nothing, she enquired, almost sharply:

'Why is it that you've never married?'

He said:

'Until this week, I've never seen the woman I want to marry.'

The word 'seen' was a little pathetic in the circumstances, but with joy and gladness Lily's heart was beating!

'And you have seen someone this week.'

'Yes, I have,' he answered gravely.

She led him straight back to the car. She was going to do nothing to spoil this perfect moment.

She was again the life and laughter of the Blaethorne party all the evening and, once again, she fancied that poor Miss Faling did not like her. Through all the merriment and gaiety, she was evolving a plan. Only one day remained. She must think of the time and the place most proper for his proposal. At the end of the evening she drew him for a moment aside:

'Could you come to tea with me tomorrow? I would like you to know where I live. Mr. Blac-thorne would bring you, I'm sure. Just our two selves. . . .'

His sightless eyes looked into her, as though they saw straight to where that queer, oddly feathered bird, her soul, was nesting.

'You are so very kind,' he said.

So, on the following afternoon, everything was arranged. She fussed over the details, which was, in a way, a waste. But he seemed to see so much

more than he really *could* see! She patted the cushions on the sofa; that was where they would sit, that was where, under a little careful direction, he would overcome his shyness and propose. All was ready.

But, at four o'clock, Clara came in with a note.

'Mr. Blaethorne left this,' she said.

With trembling fingers, Lily tore the envelope and read:

DEAR MISS FENNINGS—What you will think of me! My rudeness! But the fact is that I am leaving for Exeter in an hour's time. I learnt today that I am wanted for a job tomorrow — a job too good for me to miss.

How can I ever thank you for all your kindness to me this week? I will never never forget it.

There is one little thing I would like to say. I do hope you won't think it impertinent. You spoke yesterday of my blindness as an affliction. You must not think or speak of it like that. We don't think of it as an affliction, I assure you — rather sometimes it seems to me that it is the people who can see who are afflicted. Nor do we want really very much attention. You were wonderful in helping me as you did, but blind people really rather like doing things for themselves. And it is wonderful what they can do! If that sounds ungrateful, I don't mean it that way. I shall *never* forget your kindness.

And one last thing. I know you'll be glad to hear that Miss Ealing and I are going to be married. We had never met before this week, but at once we felt that we belonged to one another. She tells me that she has a disfigurement, but to me she is, and always will be, simply the most beautiful girl in the world.

With every good wish, I am, Yours very sincerely,

FRANCIS BARTY.

Lily dropped the letter and burst into tears.

She cried and cried. Later, when her eyes were dry but flaming, she had a fantastic vision of all the Blind leaving town — there they were, moving together in a ghostly determined mass, their heads up, their sightless eyes staring, seeing more, oh, far far more, than they were supposed to see!

She hated, hated, hated them — the nasty, self-satisfied, spying creatures.

Two mornings later, coming through Arden Gate, she encountered Mr. Marlowe with his ear-trumpet. She was surprised to find him younger and handsomer than she had supposed him. Then, he was a gentleman and wore his clothes beautifully.

‘Why, Mr. Marlowe!’ she cried. ‘How delightful to see you!’

Then she shouted down his ear-trumpet about the weather. He was greatly pleased.

‘Let me walk with you a little way.’

‘If it isn’t a bore, with my deafness.’

‘No, no. . . . It’s so tiresome for you, but not for *us*!’

She put her hand for a moment on his arm, and they walked along gaily together.

## THE FAITHFUL SERVANT





## THE FAITHFUL SERVANT

No writer of stories should ever point a moral. I know that very well. Nor is it exactly a moral that I am pointing this time. In telling you about Mrs. Rayson and the Negro, I am calling your attention to something that in all probability you have not noticed — namely, that if you, in your own private life, pursue a virtue, a crime, a habit, a taste far enough, it brings you into contact with the strangest persons — and not, in general, living ones. And when I say ‘living’ I mean individuals obeying, for a brief period, the physical laws of this momentary existence.

All this is a pompous and wordy introduction to Mrs. Rayson, who was never pompous, although she was often wordy. *Whichever* she was, she was the last person in the world you would expect to find in warm friendship with a Negro wearing a primrose-coloured cap and bright-blue collar. Yet so it was. And the word that united them was Fidelity.

Mrs. Rayson had been for a great many years, housekeeper to Frederick Rowlandson, Esquire, of Salt House, Polchester. Rowlandson, whom I knew well, deserves a whole book to himself. He was the only human being in our town who

truly merited the name of Connoisseur, and, in fact, he was famous for his collection of pictures far beyond our town. At the big Winter Exhibitions at Burlington House, you would often read in the catalogue that a Reynolds or a Matisse or a Rembrandt drawing had been lent by 'Frederick Rowlandson, Salt House, Polchester, Glebeshire.'

He was a large, fat man, untidy, with mild blue eyes and a drooping moustache. He inherited his fortune from his father, who had invented some kind of tooth-paste. Salt House was a hideous building, erected by Rowlandson Senior at the very worst period of Victorian taste: it stood in a sheltered valley only a mile or so outside Polchester. The inside of this ugly building was simply plastered with oils and drawings. No one knew where young Rowlandson had got his taste from. The old man had none, but, a widower for the last twenty years of his life, he adored his boy, his only child, and let him do as he pleased. Young Rowlandson began to buy pictures somewhere about 1880, when Manet, Cézanne and the rest were still derided in their own country, and almost unknown in England. His first important purchase was an Ingres drawing, a male nude, and it hung over his study mantelpiece until the day of his death. Many people in Polchester thought it improper, no fig-leaves being anywhere indicated. He had been to Harrow and King's College, Cambridge, and it was at King's that he made a friendship with Michael Testy, one of the best art critics England has ever had. From then on, Testy advised him about his purchases.

In twenty years Rowlandson learnt a lot. His personal preference was for Italian Primitives and Old Master drawings, but his collection was most catholic. Not only catholic, but confused. You could never tell what you would see next. All along the wall of the main staircase were Constable drawings, dozens of them, lovely and sparkling with misted English fire, but directly after them, on the top landing, were Dufys and Légers and Braques. His big Italian pictures were, however, together and separate in the big drawing-room. He had a grand Tintoretto *Dethronement* and a superb Titian female head. Over the mantelpiece of the small drawing-room hung the Quentin Matsys that is, with Mrs. Rayson, the subject of this story.

Mrs. Rayson came to Rowlandson as his housekeeper when he was quite a young man. She must have been rather pretty then, although no one, I am sure, suggested anything improper between them. Rowlandson, apparently, had no 'affairs.' He lived only for his pictures — and Mrs. Rayson possessed a husband, a loafer, who appeared and disappeared and was at last killed in the war.

She did not, I suspect, keep her looks very long. She grew stout and was always untidy. Her face was pleasant, but stupid. She was, in fact, a stupid woman and was not, I am sure, a very good housekeeper. The house never looked very clean or disciplined. The maids seemed happy, but independent, and Frank Gunther, Rowlandson's chauffeur, was as cheerful, round-

faced a man as you'd ever see, but his uniform was not smart, nor his grand cars very clean.

Everything and everyone concerned with Salt House was careless and disorderly, including Rowlandson, but Rowlandson seemed to prefer it thus.

Mrs. Rayson adored him. When I knew him she was middle-aged and shapeless. She had agreeable light-brown hair, always a trifle disorderly; she had the pleasant, rather meaningless, smile of a peasant who is happy but does not bother to think why, and her voice was soft and friendly. She was a terrific talker and no respecter of persons. She adored Rowlandson, but thought him a crazy child who should be indulged by her, because she loved him. She resented that he should spend so much money on pictures. Every time that he went to London or Paris, she knew that more pictures would arrive at the house, and she hated the men she vaguely called 'these dealers' so intensely that it was lucky for them that they never paid Rowlandson a visit. She would, I am sure, have put poison in their soup. Michael Testy sometimes came to stay and she would have hated him if she could, but no one could hate him — he was so very amiable, generous and unmalicious.

She ruled Salt House like an untidy queen: she reminded me, in fact, very strongly of the White Queen in *Alice*. She tried to make an ally of me in the picture-buying question.

'You know, sir, he's got far more already than the house can hold, and, as I tell him again and

again, he doesn't know what he *has* got in the top rooms, all piled against the wall they are. Why doesn't he sell some of them? I ask him that and he says he can't bear to part with them, which seems to me pure foolish as he never looks at them. And there's lots wants doing to the house and I don't think it's right with all these Unemployed and the Germans as unfriendly as they are.' Then a really lovely smile transfigured her round, comfortable face:

'But there. It makes him happy and that's the main thing.'

There was, however, one picture that she liked. This was the *Quintin Matsys* of which I have already spoken. This picture had a romantic history. It represented a wealthy merchant or Town Councillor or Court official, dressed in a rich fur gown. He was staring in front of him, and against the lower part of his gown was a crown of thorns. To the right of him were some trees and, on the left, a Negro in a primrose-coloured cap and wearing a bright-blue collar. This Negro was looking anxiously at the Councillor.

Now this picture, a most brilliant example of *Matsys* at his best, was part of a large altar-piece that, until the end of the eighteenth century, had been the glory of some Flemish church. No one living had any knowledge of the picture, but it was supposed that it represented the Crucifixion and that these two figures were part of the watching crowd. The church had been destroyed by fire, and a monk, escaping, had saved this part of

the picture. This monk had afterwards lived with a family in England and, in return for their kindness to him, had given them the painting. This same family had sold it to Rowlandson.

It made, however, a very complete thing in itself. The colour was gloriously rich; the fur of the coat, the dark green of the trees, the brown of the Negro's face, and the richness of his blue collar — these were so brilliant that the whole painting was alive, deep in its profundity and reality. Rowlandson called it *The Faithful Servant*, and once you had heard that, you could not believe that it could be anything else. The most lovely feature of it was the gaze of the Negro at his master. His thick lips were a little apart; his countenance expressed ardently his fidelity, and his anxiety — his anxiety is to what his master would do, or rather is to the effect that the scene would have on him. You felt that the servant knew his master so well that he realized how moving a moment this was for him. It might alter his life! Would he not even now perhaps expose himself by some public protest? The wonderful thing in the picture was the complete absorption of the servant in his master. He had no thought, no eyes, for the general scene. He was waiting to follow his master wherever he might go. It was absurd, of course, to suppose that Mrs. Rayson saw all this in the picture. She did not see it as a picture at all, but the Negro represented a principle to her that she completely understood. Just so would she too behave were her master in any danger.

'You know,' Rowlandson would say, with that fat chuckle especially his, 'that is the only picture in the house Mrs. Rayson approves of. It tells her some kind of story that she can understand.'

And Mrs. Rayson said to me herself:

'I don't know anything about pictures, sir — only I like what I do like, if you understand what I mean. But there, sir, that picture I *do* understand. There are some in the world, I believe, won't hold with black folk, but that black servant, even though he *has* got thick lips, was a good man once, whoever he was. And he's as alive to me as if I'd known him. That will sound silly to you, sir, but it's true all the same.'

I said it didn't sound silly to me at all.

And now I come to the harrowing part of my story. For Rowlandson, quite suddenly, and without any warning to anybody, married. He was married in a register office in London and, after a fortnight's holiday abroad, brought his wife home.

Polchester has all the faults, prejudices, provincialism of other Cathedral towns, but, if you have lived there for a long time, you do, most certainly, develop a pride and a warm affection for it. The Cathedral is so solemn, the old houses with their enclosed gardens so really English, the sea is so near, the moors beyond the town's walls are so open and free. I would not say that we citizens are altogether a loving brotherhood: we have our gossip, our spite, our malice like the rest of the



world. And we have also a corporate sense and care for one another, and have a certain pride in one another. Now, of Rowlandson we were always especially proud. He was our only international figure, unless our Bishop might be considered one. Never, since the days of Harmer John the Dane, had we possessed anyone who lived ardently for beauty and, as we thought, was selfless in his pursuit of it. We had never contemplated his marrying anyone. He seemed to care very little for women and there had never been, concerning him, a breath of scandal. We felt that, because of his passion for art, he was free of that maddening, disappointing, enchanting, baffling poison, sexual passion. When we heard that he had married, we could not believe it, and then, when we knew that it was true, we did hope that he had married wisely.

The very moment that we saw Julia Rowlandson, we all knew that he had married most unwisely. I shall never understand why he did it — there are dark places in all our hearts — but I suppose that she, for a brief moment, beguiled his senses and caught him before he could fly into safety.

Julia Rowlandson was not even pretty. She was small and soft and fluffy. She had cold blue eyes, a turned-up nose and a false smile. I am not prejudiced. She was as selfish and cold-hearted a creature as I shall ever know. She was, I think, about thirty years of age, and Rowlandson was a wonderful catch for her.

At first he was, for some unknown reason, very

proud of her. He said to me, one evening, talking rather like a bashful schoolboy:

‘What luck! I’m no chicken and I’m no beauty. To think that Julia should care for me! And it’s just what I need. Someone to pull this house together, tidy everything up. She’s a marvellous manager.’

That Julia was! She immediately set about putting things to rights. She had her qualities. The house changed under her hand. She gave charming little dinner-parties. Rowlandson was tidied up as well as the house, and efficiency was everywhere. But how the servants hated her! In these democratic days, it is wonderful to me that there is anyone left who can look on servants as servants. Just as we are, most of us, paid to do a job for someone or other, so are they paid to do a job for us. We are all in the same boat and we should all be friends together, working for the same good cause. But Julia had the old-fashioned ideas. Her servants were her slaves and that was the beginning and end of the arrangement.

It was from plump, good-natured Frank Gunther that I first heard. I could not believe that he could be so venomous.

‘I would leave tomorrow, but chauffeurs’ jobs are hard to get and I’ve been with Mr. Rowlandson for years and years, and there’s no one I think higher of. But she’s a holy terror, she is. She’ll keep me waiting for hours and hours when one word could save it. She’ll send me into the town for nothing at all, when a word on the telephone would get her what she wants. She speaks to

me like a dog and it's the same with all the servants.'

There were tears in his eyes. I thought he was going to blubber like a child from sheer rage. Julia's selfishness was a marvellous thing to witness. A spoilt, selfish woman is something that no man can rival. And about Julia there was a self-satisfaction for which there were no grounds whatever. She was not beautiful, not clever, not kindly, not gracious. She needed a criminal assault to bring her to her senses.

And so here these two women were, Mrs. Rayson and Julia Rowlandson.

One afternoon, when it was all over, I had a full and sufficient account of the whole business from Mrs. Rayson's own lips, one wintry afternoon, when the snow was falling like lazy afterthoughts across the misted window. I would like to give the story in Mrs. Rayson's own words, but I could never, I fear, catch her fat, reminiscent chuckle. And there was more, of course, in her story than she herself saw.

There is an exciting novel, I fancy, in the relations between those two women while they were together in that house — but it is the business of the short story to catch a moment, a shadow at a window, a horse tumbling in the street, an up-lifted glass, a cherry-tree in bloom, the smell of a soiled shirt, the padded walk of a hunting cat — any of these is all that a short story needs. *This* story exists, I fancy, at the exact moment when the sunlight fades from the room and the Negro's face is blotted out.

But first there were these two women in the house.

I am sure that Mrs. Rayson dedicated herself, from the moment that Julia entered the house, to perfect service. She did not in the very least resent her master's marriage. All that she wanted was that he should be happy, and — who knows? — she may for a long time past have felt that she was not herself as efficient as she ought to be. She was determined to give Mrs. Rowlandson, whoever she might be, the loyalty and devotion that she gave to her master.

But, of course, she could not. One glance at Julia and you would know that everything Mrs. Rayson was and stood for would infuriate her spirit — but most of all that Mrs. Rayson had something she had not, a loving, faithful heart. Not that Julia knew that. She thought that she had everything. But we can sense our loss and be maddened by it, simply because someone else says, 'Good-bye then.'

Mrs. Rayson surrendered the keys of the house and she soon saw that she had surrendered everything else. The house had always been human — untidy, but human. Now Mrs. Rayson lost her humanity.

'It was an awful thing, sir. In three days it was as though I hadn't a stomach, if you'll pardon me, sir.'

It was Julia's especial gift to turn veins and arteries into wires and strings. At the end of the first week, Julia told Mrs. Rayson what she thought of her. . . .

'She was right, sir, in some of the things she said. I've never been very orderly. I have a good laugh and then promptly forget something I ought to have remembered. Mr. Rowlandson was rather like that himself, sir.'

Julia told her:

'How you've been housekeeper here so long, I can't imagine. You're thoroughly inefficient. No wonder the house was in the mess it was.'

And then, Julia hated the pictures! I think she resented the money Rowlandson had spent on them, but not for Mrs. Rayson's reason. Mrs. Rayson thought that he would have enjoyed life more had he not spent his money so foolishly. Julia wanted the money for herself. She was as greedy as a hungry cat. She knew what the Titian and Tintoretto were worth. And to think that she might be spending that wasted money herself!

Especially she hated the Matsys. The Councillor's wise reflective gaze infuriated her, and the Negro was a Negro. She did everything she could to have it removed. She failed.

Within two months, Mrs. Rayson was her bitter enemy.

'I hated her as I've never hated any mortal. In fact, she was the first person, I think, I ever *did* hate!'

But she hated her because she was making Rowlandson unhappy. Or was she? Rowlandson was terribly proud of his Julia, and, although he was uncomfortable now, disliked to be tidy,

hated the interruptions and the dinner-parties, yet — how he was proud of her!

After a time, Julia herself was unhappy. It was not her idea to live in this small provincial place, miles from London. She found us all the dreariest lot. Not quite all of us. She began to flirt. Most of our young men at that time were not very exciting, but there *were* one or two: Henry Tattersall, Maurice Fleming, Charles Farley. Soon it became obvious to everyone in the town, save Rowlandson, that Maurice Fleming was the one. This selection on her part proved how exceedingly common and stupid Julia was. Maurice was stout and smart. Julia liked men to be stout. Within my hearing, she said:

‘Thin men are awful. You can feel their bones.’ I myself am thin as a rake.

You certainly could not feel Fleming’s bones. I doubt if he had any. He was well-dressed and had a clever crimson sports car — the regular thing. He was as vain and selfish as Julia, but he was flattered by her liking for him. He was rather old news to the younger ladies of Polchester. They were now continually together and Mrs. Rayson was horrified. She believed in fidelity quite fanatically

Then, one morning, Julia told Mrs. Rayson to take the Matsys down from the wall and hide it somewhere in the attic.

“Has the master ordered it?” I asked her. Oh no, of course not, he didn’t know anything about it and wouldn’t miss it anyway. “Wouldn’t miss it?” said I. “That’s all you know. Why, it’s

the pride and pleasure of his life," I said. Then she gets as red as a turkey-cock and stands up straight on her high heels (she wears high heels because she's so short and can't bear not to be as tall as other people). and says, "Now don't you be impertinent. I've had enough of you. Take that picture down." And I reply, "Not without master's orders," and didn't we just glare at one another! Almost insane it was.'

Mrs. Rayson was not the kind of person given to hallucinations, but it did seem to her, just then, that the Negro in the picture moved.

'I'd got as fond of him as anything by that time, sir, and that woman abusing him only made me care for him more. And suddenly I was so angry I wasn't seeing quite straight—if you understand me, sir—I seemed to see the whole of him, not just his head and neck, stepping right out of the picture, with his primrose coat, the same as his cap, and tights on, blue just like his collar. He was a strong fellow if ever I see one, with arms would kill a ox. All imagination, sir, but you'd have sworn he looked at his master to ask him a question. All imagination, and there I was, a moment later, seeing Madam walk out majestic-like on her high heels and nearly slip on the floor with them. It was almost as though the Negro gave her a push when she wasn't looking.'

And the next thing was that Mrs. Rayson found a note from young Fleming under a pin-cushion on Julia Rowlandson's dressing-table. She should not, I suppose, have read it, but instinctively she felt that it was against her master's

safety, something that endangered his happiness. I myself have never seen that note, but I understand that it began with 'darling' and had something about 'holding you in my arms again.'

It was quite enough for Mrs. Rayson. She was not shocked through moral sensitiveness, she always wanted people to be happy in any way that pleased them. But she *was* shocked to the very centre of her being by the infidelity. Julia Rowlandson had not been married more than three months and now here she was — 'darling . . . in my arms again.' She felt quite sick. She was unwell. She had to sit down. She saw very quickly that, with this note, she could deal her mistress a nasty blow. She had only to show the note to her master. . . . But what effect would it have on *him*? He would be unhappy, ashamed, and, in the end, would do nothing at all. Her knowledge of him was perfect. Rowlandson was no good at a crisis. If he knew of his wife's infidelity, his life would be poisoned at the source. He would hate her, despise her, resent her, and continue to live with her.

On the other hand, it would be a triumph for Mrs. Rayson. She would have Julia Rowlandson henceforth where she wanted her. And — best of all — she would be first with her master again.

She fought, I believe, that dim January afternoon, the battle of her life. She was not greatly accustomed to battles. Her life had been run on a very simple plane. But now — on the one hand, a selfish, triumphant revenge, but with it her master's misery. On the other hand, subjection to a woman whom now she not only hated



but despised with every warm impulse beating from her heart. To be married to her master and, within three months, to betray him. What do you think of that, ladies and gentlemen?

She went, she has told me, on that late afternoon, into the room where the Matsys was. She did not switch on the light, but watched it as the fire-light leapt up and down its surface.

It was there that she fought her battle, fought it walking about the room, her hands clenched together, looking at the picture, seeing the dark face of the Negro, the thick lips open, the serious devoted eyes turned to the Councillor — this face, now so familiar to her, leaping in and out of darkness as the flames leapt.

How she longed to hear him speak! If only he would say a word! She knew well enough that he would understand her longing for revenge. He could revenge himself well enough on anyone who hurt his master! She could just fancy his animal rage, his cry of fury, the force with which that terrific body (for she knew that it was terrific) would leap upon the enemy. But to hurt his master for the sake of revenge! No, that, she realized as the fire died, he would never do. He would never, never do.

And so at last she left the room, her decision made. She would say nothing about the note. After this she felt a physical disgust for Julia Rowlandson that was like an illness. . . .

‘As when you have a fever, sir, your head burning and your feet icy and everything feeling twice its size when you touch it.’

She hated even to look at her and, unimaginative as she was, she fancied that the dry, sarcastic mouth of the Councillor in the Matsys curled a little in additional contempt.

It was not perhaps altogether imagination, for Julia's hatred of the Matsys grew to a frenzy. She made a terrible scene one night about it. Rowlandson told me months later. . . .

'A strange thing. It was the Negro she couldn't bear.'

Mrs. Rayson's temptation meanwhile continued.

'It never left me for a moment, digging at me. Just to say a word to the master, showing him the note which, rightly or wrongly, I'd kept. She was a careless slut and that I'll call her, even after what's happened. Just to show him the note! But it wouldn't have been right — sort of betraying my trust; at least, that's how I looked at it.'

Then came the catastrophe. One morning Rowlandson asked her into his sanctum. This is a small room that has always seemed to me one of the most beautiful I know anywhere. Here he has hung his Italian primitives, Venetian, Siennese, little pictures gleaming with gold, flashing with the wings of angels, deep with that old faded rose of cloth and hanging so especially satisfying — yes, angels and oxen, and tiny, white winding roads and plum-coloured hills, with the Virgin and Child eternally worshipped.

Here, most awkwardly and with a desperate embarrassment, Rowlandson told Mrs. Rayson that she would have to go. He could scarcely, I

am sure, form his sentences:

‘Dreadfully sorry . . . most unfortunate . . . after all these years . . . but my wife and yourself . . . don’t seem to get along . . . don’t know whose fault. . . .’ Something like that. The tears, quite frankly, flowed down Mrs. Rayson’s plump cheeks. She had never been one to hide her feelings. It was the end of everything for her. Rowlandson was her child, her love, her care, her possession, her very self. The end of everything.

And now the temptation to show him the note must have been almost overpowering. A terrible longing desire, weakness of the will. She did not yield.

She hurried to her room that had, for all those years, been her home, that Rowlandson, ages ago, had hung with half a dozen pre-Raphaelite drawings — ‘because she liked pictures with a story.’ She cried and dried her eyes. She knew that for her life was over, truly and honestly, as though she had died.

So, to the *moment* of this story. I have it, of course, only second-hand. A moment in the afternoon of that same day, a sunny day, with that early spring warmth that comes to Gileshire often in January like an unexpected kiss on the cheek. The sun was just dropping behind the hill. In five minutes the room would be in dusk. Mrs. Rayson was saying good-bye to the Matsys, her bonnet on her head, her cape with the hughes, her shiny black gloves. She would not sleep another night in the house where she was not wanted.

Rowlandson had come to her earlier in the afternoon, taken her hand in his, looked at her like a witless man, and said desperately: 'Go home. . . . I'll come to see you. . . . I'll find a solution.' It was almost like the parting of lovers — these two very plain, elderly people saying good-bye.

But there was no solution. Mrs. Rayson knew that well enough. So there she stood crying in front of the Matsys. She cried very easily — at the sound of a band, at a reported gracious act of Queen Mary's (she put Queen Mary next to Rowlandson in her heart), at a stray dog with something tied to its tail, at any wedding or funeral.

She stared at the Negro with his primrose cap and bright-blue collar. He had never seemed more adoring — faithful man. Whatever he'd done he must be a good man, and the Councillor was lucky. She said good-bye to her friend the Negro. Through the half-open door, she heard Julia Rowlandson coming down from the upper floor, click, click, click with her high heels. She held her breath, lest she should be found there. She wanted to leave the house without saying a word to anyone — only the Negro.

'Good-bye, good-bye.'

The sun sank behind the hill. The room was in a sun-grey dusk. What was the Negro doing? Had he at last, for the first time in these many hundred years, removed his gaze from the Councillor? Did someone, dark thick, heavy, brush her shoulders? Had someone crossed the floor?

Was there, in the lit door-space, for an instant, a flash of primrose and blue?

This at least is true.

There was a horrible sound of a slip, a scramble, a piercing cry, a crash . . .

Mrs. Rayson found Julia Rowlandson in the hall at the bottom of the stairs, her neck broken. She had slipped on those high-heeled shoes; the stairs were steep.

'Very easily done,' the coroner said — 'dangerous, these steep stairs.'

The house soon dropped back to its comfortable untidiness again. Mrs. Rayson was no more efficient than she had been before. Rowlandson was happier, I sometimes thought, as though he now realized what he had almost lost. I overheard Mrs. Rayson once say to someone:

'I had a nasty time once — the worst I *ever* had. I don't know what I'd have done if a friend hadn't helped me.'

Julia was as though she had never been alive. She never *had* been alive. We exist by the strength of the spirit that is within us.

MISS THOM



## MISS THOM

It would be absurd, of course, to pretend that Polchester has not altered with the times. We have, for example, at this very moment, the awful problem of a By-pass pressing upon us.

The congestion of motor vehicles at the bottom of the High Street, where it debouches into the Square, and at the bottom of Orange Street, is something quite disgraceful. To cross that end of the High Street is, in spite of lights and policemen, a constant danger.

To think that, within a man's normal lifetime, Marquis's Circus proceeded on its leisurely way down the hill and an elephant tweaked Archdeacon Brandon's hat off his august head and trampled on it! Once an elephant, fine, noble creature of the jungle — now it would be a mechanized motor press!

Were, however, either Archdeacon Brandon or Canon Ronder to return today, they would admit that the Precincts, Arden Gate, the Cathedral Green, are little changed from their own day. And yet changes there are!

For instance, only five years ago, Miss Carrie Falkner took No. 23 and No. 24 The Precincts, knocked their heads together, and made one very



modern and handsome house of them, with a young gentleman decorator, all the way down from London (and *wasn't* he a queer one!) to reconcile the Tudor staircase, Adam fireplaces and steel-and-glass bathroom. They *were* all reconciled, and that in the end was due, no doubt, to Miss Falkner's extraordinary personality.

A whole book might be (and possibly one day *will* be) written about Miss Carrie Falkner's effect on Polchester — some very startling results occurred of her presence there — but, in this case, I am concerned with Miss Thom and must get to her as soon as possible. This is in fact the story of how Miss Thom affected Miss Falkner, rather than of how Miss Falkner affected Polchester. Miss Thom was ten and a bit, and Miss Falkner — well, who would ever be bold enough to say? . . . anything from fifty-one to sixty-seven.

The first point about Miss Falkner was that she was immensely rich, and we have not many rich people in Polchester. Miss Falkner's father dealt in antiques, and dealt in them so cleverly that he left his only daughter very wealthy.

No one said that he 'faked' antiques, but everyone knew that this was so, and secretly admired him the more for it. The general Polchester opinion was that, if people are crazy enough to buy warming-pans, moth-eaten chairs and rickety cupboards, they deserve all that they get.

Why Miss Falkner ever came to live in Polchester no one has ever known. She was as thin as a rake, with a face like an enquiring pony's — a pony who thinks you might have sugar in your

pocket. Her voice was deep and masculine. She had a suspicion of a moustache on her upper lip and liked gay colours.

She was a good soul, generous and silly. If you are generous no one minds your being silly. There are so many silly people who *aren't* generous. Miss Falkner really was. She gave parties and parties and parties — and the biggest of all the parties was the one she gave at Christmas for children.

This party instantly became famous, and for two reasons. One reason was the extraordinary splendour of the presents that the children received — the other was that it was *really* a snob-bish party. Miss Falkner only asked to it the children of the people whom she thought of social importance in Polchester.

She was herself a howling snob, but not unpleasant with it. I don't know what, in the old days, she'd have done about the St. Leaths at the Castle — but now, when young St. Leath and his grandmother (she was the daughter of Archdeacon Brandon) were so much abroad because of the young man's lungs, and the Castle was generally closed, she could not do very much.

For the rest, her snobbery was simple and innocent. She just liked the Best People and said so. That was why it was so astonishing when little Miss Thom received an invitation to the Christmas party.

For the Thoms were not the Best People in any possible sense of that word. Old Major Thom was a retired Army man with service in India

and a rather suspicious Cockney hangover around his vowels. Mrs. Thom was a sort of Mrs. Jellyby in a humble way — she was lost in Causes, an eager, hen-like woman, for ever pecking at people that they might feed her Causes.

Gladys Thom was the only child of these two, and, being the child of elderly people, had that 'born out of due time' atmosphere about her that often belongs to such children. Her mother paid her little attention. She was an odd-looking child. At first casual glance you would think that she was a boy, for her mother had given her an Eton crop, possibly that she might be saved the bother of looking after her child's hair.

Miss Thom had, too, the figure of a boy, thin and active. But with this there was something amazingly virginal and apart about her: everyone noticed that she was 'apart' from other children. She was 'apart' for one thing because of her delicate, old-world manners.

Being an ancient and, no doubt, self-indulgent bachelor, I could write, for a long time, about the manners of the small children of today. Since the war, it has been the 'thing' in English families for children to be, from their very cradles, friends with their parents.

Fathers and mothers take their children with them everywhere, talk about anything and everything in their presence, and give them anything they may desire. It is generally agreed that this is an excellent thing, and the old Victorian insistence that children should be kept in their place, never speak unless spoken to, be denied all

luxuries, and be forced to enjoy Spartan habits and yet more Spartan food, is very rightly derided.

The drawbacks to the modern plan are that young children anticipate far too early all the pleasures and excitements of later life, so that, when they do grow up, there is nothing left for them to enjoy; and secondly, if their parents are neither very wise nor circumspect in their private lives, the children learn the sordid and disorderly things of life before they are wise enough to see them for what they are.

Today, more than ever before, fine parents have fine children and parents not so fine handicap their poor little offspring most damnably.

Above all, children react to older influences to which they are nakedly exposed so swiftly that damage is done before anyone recognizes it. Hence the harm that Miss Falkner did in Polchester.

She adored children, or rather, she adored the children who flattered and followed her.

All the little girls in the Precincts very quickly discovered that they had more fun with Miss Falkner than with anyone else. She took them to the cinema, fed them with chocolates and ice-creams, gave them presents and invited them to dances in her house which lasted into the small hours. The parents were too deeply impressed by Miss Falkner's wealth, and too weak in their good-nature, to protest. If one little girl or boy went to Miss Falkner's house, then the others must go too, for the modern child refuses to be denied anything that another child has, and is

remarkably mature in all the fashions of unpleasantness.

Miss Thom went to the High School in Polchester and was generally considered a figure of fun there: not only was she plainly dressed — her old-fashioned politeness to her elders naturally seemed to everyone an absurdity. The strange thing was that no amount of teasing, or even bullying, had the slightest effect on her. She was like a little rock: she had something inside her that no one could touch or affect. Her speech was precise and old-maidish.

She was, however, nothing of a prig, nor was she ever unhappy. She was never known to cry and a smile constantly irradiated her whole face, as though she had some secret knowledge that assured her that all was well. She must have been often very lonely and yet you would never call her a lonely child. She was always busy about something. She loved to play games, but was so bad at them that any other child would have been ashamed. She was not ashamed in the least.

She was not clever, and schoolmistresses abused her, kept her in on sunny days; but they could never say of her that she was idle or lazy, because she tried, with her brow puckered and her hands clenched, to learn what she was taught. Oddly enough, although so neat and precise in her person, she was not neat in her work, but wrote an atrocious hand and there were blots on all her pages.

She never complained about anything. She was not given to confidences. Nor was she a

weak character. In a little while, it was thought by her schoolfellows that she was just the person to do the odd jobs and tiresome extras that were a nuisance for themselves. Sometimes she would oblige and sometimes not, and, if she refused, nothing could compel her. She made up her mind and then stuck to it.

When she was in company that treated her kindly, she was radiantly happy — radiance was the word. But, on these joyful and rare occasions, she was never noisy. She never shouted, nor laughed loudly, nor giggled. She just enjoyed herself for all she was worth in a quiet way.

No one knew anything about her home life. Other children were never invited to her house, and Mrs. Thom would not have known what to do with them had they appeared. Now and again Miss Thom was herself invited and, after her visits, parents said:

‘What a queer child!’

She was not, however, queer in the least. She was simply self-contained.

Then, in the year of which I am writing, she *did* develop a passion for another little girl — Nancy Bolitho. The Bolithos were a happy-go-lucky pair who lived beyond their means in an extravagant, exaggerated way. Mrs. Bolitho was a very pretty, silly woman, and Mr. Bolitho a very handsome, silly man. They had three children, two boys and a girl, and, while the luck lasted, they enjoyed every minute of their days and nights.

Nancy was Miss Thom’s age and an ‘exquisite’: she had golden hair, blue eyes, a perfect

complexion and a heart as cold as a stone. She had been admired by every relation and every friend of the house since her first year, and it was only natural that she should admire herself to desperation.

But even this she did coldly and with definite calculation. Miss Thom loved her at sight, but made no kind of fuss about her adoration. She did not give her presents, nor run errands for her, nor sit and gaze at her. She simply, in her quiet, restrained way, gave her her heart. Nancy Bolitho neither then nor at any other time knew anything about that dangerous betraying organ. She thought Miss Thom ugly and stupid, but she did feel, dimly, somewhere, that Miss Thom's devotion was not quite of the ordinary kind.

She possessed all the teasing and selfish technique of the professional beauty. One day she would cut Miss Thom through all the school hours, not looking at her, not answering her, inciting the other girls to mock.

Miss Thom, resembling a miniature Viola at Orsino's court, gave no sign, save possibly an especial brightness of her eyes, that she noticed anything at all. This aggravated Nancy, who was accustomed to attention.

'Well, Gladys Thom — that's manners, I *must* say! Not to answer when I speak to you?'

'You haven't spoken to me, Nancy. You haven't spoken all day.'

'Oh, haven't I? That's all you know. Why don't you listen?'

Miss Thom smiled and gave a little skip.

'Don't do that. You look so silly jumping about. What does your mother cut your hair like that for? You look like a great ugly boy.'

'It's less trouble, I suppose.'

'Less trouble! . . . If your hair was like mine your mother wouldn't cut it, would she?'

'Oh, no, Nancy. That *would* be a shame!'

'There you are then. . . .'

The voice became soft and besecching:

'Get me some of that almond toffee at Teacher's. You can give it me this afternoon. I haven't a penny. I'll buy *you* some another day.'

'I haven't a penny, either.'

'Oh, you story!'

Miss Thom disliked to be called a liar so she walked away, and Nancy Bolitho stamped and called her names.

Nancy was, of course, Miss Falkner's pet and was, Miss Falkner was resolved, to be Queen of the Evening at the Christmas Party. This Queen of the Evening affair was not really in Miss Falkner's hands. It was in the hands of the Polchester young gentlemen. The climax of Miss Falkner's party every year was when the boys voted for the loveliest, sweetest, and most charming of the girls. She was then acclaimed, carried into the dining-room, greeted as Queen, asked to be the first to cut the Christmas cake, then, after supper, to choose the boy of her heart and start with him the Lambeth Walk or whatever the dance of the moment might be.

The boys voted: it was entirely their affair. But Miss Falkner knew her influence: a word or



two in the right direction — to Tom Belsize, for instance, or Bob Rawlins, the son of the Precentor, and the thing was done. This year she was determined that Nancy should be the Queen.

For this reason or that, she was this Christmas rather nervous about the party. In truth, she had, during her few years at Polchester, spoiled the boys as well as the girls. They were the boys of ten years and under, some of them still at home, some of them going every day to the preparatory school at Denchurst.

After Miss Falkner had petted them a little, they became a Gang, and certain of them, Bob Rawlins and young Belsize for example, made real nuisances of themselves, teasing the little girls, ringing door-bells, frightening servant-maids, setting dogs to fight, just like street hooligans.

Miss Falkner was the more surprised at this because it was only the boys of the very best Polchester families who were invited to her house.

Nevertheless, Nancy Bolitho dominated the little boys — with her they were never wild. They would stare at her, fascinated, almost you might say blinded, by her beauty. Only some of them, of course. Others hated all girls alike and thought them 'sickening.'

There came a day, some six weeks before her party, when there was a very strange meeting between Miss Thom and Miss Falkner.

It was about four on a November afternoon, and Miss Thom was passing the Arden Gate, books under her arm, returning from the High

School. Miss Falkner was walking rapidly on her way to a bridge tea at Mrs. Rawlins's untidy but hospitable dwelling. They collided. A lamp shone just above them and Miss Falkner said:

'Oh dear, I *am* so sorry.'

Miss Falkner's hat was in the very latest fashion of the day, that is, it was a bunch of violets with a thin black circle of felt tilted over her left eye. She was wrapped in heavy furs and her face was very freshly stamped and painted on the top of a neck that was wrinkled like a very old hen's. She said afterwards that, from the moment she set eyes on that plain, boy-like girl in the lamplight, a shiver went through her.

'I felt most uncomfortable and I simply can't think why!'

There was no reason for feeling uncomfortable. Miss Thom bent down to pick up her books, smiled, and said:

'I beg your pardon, Miss Falkner.'

'Aren't you Gladys Thom — Nancy's friend?'

'Yes, Miss Falkner.'

'I've heard a great deal about you. Well, Gladys, I do hope I haven't hurt you.'

'No, thank you, Miss Falkner.'

'Mercy, child, you must be perished in that thin coat. Hasn't your mother anything warmer for you to wear?'

'I'm not at all cold, thank you.'

'The awful thing was,' Miss Falkner told the assembled bridge-party directly after, 'I seemed unable to move. There I was, late already, and you know how windy it is just by Arden Gate,

and that ridiculous child in her school dress with her hair cut short. It was just as though I was waiting for her to say something. She's certainly the politest child I've *ever* encountered. She embarrasses you by her politeness — and yet, all the same, she makes you most uncomfortable — as though she thought your clothes ridiculous, or something.'

Poor Miss Thom certainly thought nothing of the kind. She was greatly excited by the encounter, for Nancy had told her many stories of Miss Falkner's splendours and generosity.

It was one of Miss Thom's misfortunes that there was no one at home to whom she might tell her adventures, for neither her father nor her mother ever asked her a question or listened to her account of her day. No, she never dreamed of criticizing Miss Falkner. She thought of her as a being of another world, a world where huge chandeliers of crystal shimmered, where soft music played, where Nancy looked like an angel from heaven, where, best of all, there was an iced cake as big as a house. For Miss Thom was greedy just like everyone else. No, she did not criticize Miss Falkner: rather did she admire the bunch of violets and the round of black felt. It seemed to her bewitching.

Miss Thom had nothing to do with boys. She had scarcely ever spoken to one. But she liked greatly to look at them, on Sunday morning in the Cathedral, or passing time in the High Street.

She liked boys. She thought them delightful. But one day, in the Precincts, Rawlins and one or

two others surrounded her and teased her outrageously. They asked her whether she was really a boy or a girl: they mocked her: they called her rude names.

This was a new situation for Miss Thom, but she met it adequately, answering their silly questions with dignity, even cracking a joke at her own expense. They left her and were considerably impressed by her. Rawlins said that 'she wasn't stuffed-up a bit.'

And then — the miraculous occurred! Miss Thom received an invitation to Miss Falkner's Christmas Party. I would like to have been present when Mrs. Thom tore open the envelope and the card popped out. Although I have never entered the Thom's dwelling, I am sure I know exactly how Mrs. Thom opens her letters, tearing the things savagely and scattering the envelopes about the floor. Mrs. Thom must, even in the middle of pursuing her Causes, have felt some surprise at this invitation. Why, she didn't know Miss Falkner. They had never called — not that such a thing mattered to Mrs. Thom. Of course the child should go. She had one party frock and a pretty pair of silver shoes. But why had Miss Falkner invited her? How extraordinarily kind!

It was not, I am sure, because of kindness that Miss Falkner invited Miss Thom — it was from hatred.

The ways of the virginal heart are mysterious and obscure, but I fancy that, from the moment of that little conversation in the Precincts, Miss Falkner hated Miss Thom and was haunted by

her. For Miss Falkner was not, deep in her heart, sure of herself, and it is the people who are not sure of themselves who hate other people.

She was certain that that chit of a child had stared at her impertinently, finding her overdressed and absurd. Miss Thom, of course, had done nothing of the kind. She had even admired the wisp of violets. She never criticized anybody, there being too many other things to do. In any case, criticism of others comes from fear of criticism of oneself, and Miss Thom had no such fear.

'I'll just show that ridiculous-looking child,' I can imagine Miss Falkner saying to herself. So she asked her to her party — just to impress and overwhelm her. I can imagine, without much difficulty, Miss Thom's own feelings when she heard the news. She was by nature a joyful creature, extracting enormous pleasure out of almost nothing at all. But this was *not* nothing! Nothing? Why, it was the greatest, most wonderful thing that ever happened to her.

Shyly she must have confided to Nancy Bolitho the extraordinary news. And Nancy, I don't doubt, was profoundly surprised. Then, very quickly, it must have seemed to her an extraordinary joke, and she told all her friends, male and female, and they must have rocked with laughter.

No one had ever seen Gladys Thom at a party. No one had ever seen her in anything but her plain school uniform. Nancy, who had been matured far beyond her age by flattery, saw at once the contrast that this would make in her

favour — Gladys Thom and herself! That short-haired, scrimpy little creature in her shabby frock! It would make her, Nancy's, triumph all the more complete. For it was to be, this year, the triumph of triumphs. Miss Falkner foresaw it, and she whispered in Nancy's ear that she had bought, this year, for the Queen of the Evening's prize, the best present ever — a necklace of small but genuine pearls.

Nancy, during these weeks, dreamed of those pearls night after night. Miss Falkner did propaganda among the little boys. 'I don't want to prejudice any of you, but, when you come to choose your Queen at my party, there's only one possible choice in *my* opinion.' Or: 'I've not seen a child as beautiful as Nancy Bolitho — *such* colouring! She's the loveliest child in England.'

Meanwhile Miss Thom, as was her way when there was anything important to be done, went seriously to work. She had no one whom she might consult — her mother was quite useless about clothes, and old Mrs. Ruggan, the cook, worse than incompetent.

She told Mrs. Richards, wife of the Cathedral organist, a few weeks later that, when she saw how shabby her silk dress was, she improved it with some pieces of fine silk that she found in her mother's wardrobe.

Here an unsuspected sense of humour appeared:

'I didn't see why I shouldn't have the silk rather than the babies in Whitechapel!'

But, of course, Miss Thom was not a good

seamstress at that time, although Mrs. Richards, who came to love her because of this very party, taught her a number of things before the next Christmas came round.

Perhaps Miss Thom sighed when she saw herself in the looking-glass. But perhaps also she did not, for she must have learned very early that life was too full of a number of things to allow time for regret at one's oddities and angularities. She was so happy at the idea of going to Miss Falkner's party, her breast was so overflowing with love for Miss Falkner for having asked her, that she ran past herself into a state of impersonal ecstasy.

She skipped about her bedroom, I don't doubt, and threw her arms round old Major Thom's neck and kissed his rough tobacco-scented cheek.

She went, when the evening arrived, with Mrs. Richards and the Richards children. Mrs. Richards is, in fact, my chief informant as to the events at the party, for, alas, I was not myself invited.

'I hardly knew the child at the time. I asked her to come with us because Lucy, my little girl, told me that there was no one else to take her. How odd she looked! I am afraid that I regretted asking her — to be burdened all evening with such a child!

'But very soon, before we got to the house, she had touched my heart. She was so eager, so breathlessly happy. Her eyes shone like little blue-flame fires. Her dress was worn, and none the better for attempts that someone had made —

her mother, I suppose — to trim it with fresh material.'

'No, not her mother. She did it herself.'

'Yes. She told me later. Her short hair, her thin eager face, her staring eyes — well, you know how children are! They hate to be mixed up with anything unusual or peculiar. I could see that my Lucy and Jim wished we hadn't brought her.'

'Did she talk?'

'No. She just sat on the edge of the seat in the car, her thin knees planted wide, and not saying a word.

'When we got there, when she saw that really splendid room with the two great crystal chandeliers gleaming, glittering with light, the flowers (carnations, many of them, and at *Christmas*: deep purple ones and those lovely rose and white that are thick and smooth like the page of a missal), and the great piano, the light flooding down on its rich, deep, shining surface, the shining floor running away from it, a lake of amber, Gladys Thom said at once to me:

'“The piano's like water.”'

'Soon she was the most noticeable child in the room, and I saw that they all thought it a great joke that she should be there.'

'Was she embarrassed?'

'Not in the slightest. She stood there without moving, intent, absorbed, taking it all in. Then she saw Nancy Bolitho, who was looking perfectly lovely. She had a little court of boys around her, and was behaving like the Queen she expected to be in an hour's time. Gladys Thom went straight



up to her. Another child would have been afraid to break in. Not Gladys. She went up, smiling the eager but rather mysterious smile that she has. I heard her say:

“ Oh, Nancy! ”

‘ And then Nancy said something and the little boys laughed. I know that it was insulting, and my Lucy would have burst into tears. Not Gladys Thom. She walked straight away back to where she had been before. It was then that I began to like her, yes, even to envy her. One’s upset so often by such silly, meaningless little things, isn’t one? ’

‘ Certainly one is,’ I answered.

‘ I went over to her and stood beside her. She looked up at me and smiled.

“ Oh, it’s lovely,” she said, “ especially the camels.”

‘ She had noticed two large rosy T’ang camels on the marble mantelpiece.’

Mrs. Richards said:

‘ I’m not boring you, am I? ’

I said that I was absorbed and she ought to write novels.

‘ It’s only that I remember every moment of that evening. It was a kind of turning-point. . . . Then they had games. They played Blind Man’s Buff, Hunt the Slipper, Musical Chairs. Gladys Thom played games too eagerly. She loved them and threw herself heart and soul into them and was clumsy and awkward — as though she didn’t see far enough. The fact was that she saw beyond them.

'There was another thing,' Mrs. Richards told me: 'Miss Falkner had some sort of "Cup" for the children. It was innocent enough, I dare-say, but still there was *something* in it and they all began to be rather more excited than was fitting.

'You know how a group of children can, suddenly, and for apparently no reason, revert back to original, primeval animalism? You watch them and they seem, in the candle-light, to make strange signs to one another and to whisper secrets improper for that other, more social world. Something like that happened now. They pinched one another; they chased one another in circles. The little girls laughed with hysterical excitement.

'They played Musical Chairs and someone pulled a chair away and Gladys Thom sat down on the floor with a bump. Everyone roared with laughter.

'It was at that moment, I think,' Mrs. Richards said, 'that I began to love her. She took it so perfectly. It must have hurt, but she gave no sign. She got up and saw that part of the new silk on the hem was torn. She ripped it off, gave herself a shake, and then joined in the next game as though nothing had happened.

'At last came the great moment of the evening. The boys retired into another room and all the little girls excitedly waited. You could see that Nancy was sure of her reward, and, having read fairy stories from your childhood, you on your side will be sure that she did not receive it.

'Nor did she. Bob Rawlins stood in the doorway and announced in a high, breaking, amused

voice that Gladys Thom was to be the Queen.'

Had the boys done it out of devilment? Had they felt annoyance at Miss Falkner's efforts at propaganda? Had it seemed amusing to them to choose the plainest girl in the room?

No one will ever know. All that one does know is that Miss Falkner took it as an insult to herself, and Gladys Thom took it as fun of the rarest sort. Both reactions were perfectly visible to everybody.

Mrs. Richards, who was not a very imaginative woman, told me:

'Miss Falkner looked quite sick. She was wearing a kind of gold tiara and a dress of crimson velvet, very tight-fitting with a naked back. But, when she heard what the boys had done, she was, all in a moment, an old, sick woman. It was as though all the world suddenly mocked her. As though her whole elaborate scheme for making her old age possible had tumbled to dust. Nancy Bolitho quite uncontrollably burst into tears and had to be led away. I should like to say that Gladys Thom was distressed and that the disappointment of one she worshipped ruined her own pleasure.

'It was, I am afraid, nothing of the kind. Gladys Thom needed only this great surprise to make this wonderful evening perfect.'

And she must have done it very well, for Mrs. Richards said:

'When they carried her shoulder-high through to supper she raised her head really like a queen, and — I don't know whether you've ever noticed

her smile, but it's mysterious, isn't it? — as though her thoughts were pleasantly engaged, but far away. And here was a time for once when her funny old-world manners *weren't* absurd. When she was on her throne and the children came to pay her court, even they were impressed and awed by her perfect dignity and poise. "Like Queen Victoria must have been" — someone said.

Of course Miss Falkner had to give her the prize — and *what* a beauty it was! She had made an especial effort this year because of Nancy Bolitho. It was a necklace of small but genuine pearls. When Miss Thom looked at it she drew one deep breath and turned to Mrs. Richards and said:

'They are mine and nobody's going to give them away to anybody.'

I don't know whether her mother tried to snatch them for one of the Causes. In any case she didn't succeed. But that isn't the point of my story.

Nor is it the point, as it certainly ought to be, that Miss Thom became, from that moment, a radiant beauty and ruled the boys of our town.

She did not change in the slightest, and the boys found her as dull and unlovely after the party as they had done before.

Nor is the point Miss Thom's happiness, although that is pleasant to contemplate.

No, the point is that, quite suddenly, a week or two later, Miss Falkner decided to leave Polchester. Yes, she sold her beautiful home and departed.

She gave no reason. But the Polchester children were saved. Saved from what? From the three devils of greed, lust and idleness, three powerful little devils. Devils altogether too powerful for little children, even wise little children of today.

I know why Miss Falkner left. Miss Thom, altogether without knowing it, had made a mock of her. Miss Thom, altogether without knowing it, saved her own generation in Polchester.

‘Altogether without knowing it’ — yes — *that*, I suppose, is the point of this story.

WOMEN ARE MOTHERLY



## WOMEN ARE MOTHERLY

THE strange story of Mrs. Heneage and Miss Golightly really began with little Rose Heneage's disobedience. She went down the street in the rain to take another look at the Dog Shop when Mrs. Heneage had seated her firmly in the school-room and forbidden her to leave the house. Had that busy lady been able to keep her eye on her daughter for the next hour or so, all would have been well; but as she had ten children, one was in fact constantly hearing in the Heneage home the rich, kindly, eager voice of Mrs. Heneage, 'Chris, Chris, where are you? I want you to run to the stationer's for another bottle of ink. You can take Amy and Daisy with you. Ellen, come here, darling, I have just got five minutes and we can do your ears. Agatha, run up to Father's room and see whether he wants anything for the next half-hour,' and so on, and so on. Miss Golightly, living next door, would, from the other side of the wall, hear constantly this family chorus, and she did not dislike it, being one of those most unfortunate of God's creatures who are desperately gregarious by nature, but for some mysterious reason are altogether unable to win the affections of their fellow human beings.



Mr. and Mrs. Heneage had had ten children with a sort of jolly indifference, which their earlier finances had scarcely warranted. Mrs. Heneage, when plump, jolly Isobe<sup>1</sup> Jones, had said firmly to all her friends, 'When I am married I am going to have lots and lots of children.' It is said that what we desire in our youth we shall certainly have in our old age if we desire it sufficiently. This, I believe, was Goethe's remark, and Mrs. Heneage proved it to be true. Then, quite suddenly, Mr. Heneage had a most unexpected success. He was a novelist by profession, and lived in a nice little house with a garden and two fruit trees in the town of Polchester, in Glebeshire, and for a long time this nice little house in Polchester and his ten children exhausted every penny that his books brought him. But Mrs. Heneage was cheerful and industrious, and somehow they scraped along. Then, on a miraculous day, his novel, *Girls will be Boys*, was published and became, to everybody's intense surprise, the year's best-selling work of fiction.

There is undoubtedly always a reason why a best seller is a best seller, but nobody ever knew and nobody ever will know why *Girls will be Boys* sold more than any other of the six thousand new novels published that year. The press received it with their usual indifference. Publishers' advertisements were both false and meagre. Charles Heneage himself did not consider this by any means one of his best works. Nevertheless, when it had been published a month or so, it began to sell and sell. Even in London people

at parties could be heard asking one another, 'Have you read *Girls will be Boys*? Most entertaining.'

Heneage had no very great opinion of himself as a writer. All he wanted was that the ten mouths of his ten children should be filled; but when, six months after the book's publication, an enormous cheque arrived, when his novel was bought for a film by Hollywood, and began also to fascinate the Middle West of America, the happiness of the Heneage family knew no bounds. They did not, however, move from their little house in Polchester, for they had grown to be fond of it, and they liked the close quarters and the noise, and now four of the five boys were away at school, so it really wasn't so bad. In fact, they were afraid of their good fortune. 'I can never do it again,' Charles Heneage remarked to his wife in the early hours of the morning.

'Why not, dear?' Mrs. Heneage asked.

'Because you never do do it again. No best seller ever repeats itself, but I will be able to live on the reputation of this book for some years to come, I think.' With almost every post press-cuttings arrived, and he was intensely proud, because now he was attended to by the young men critics who wanted every novelist to be a Communist. Charles Heneage was most clearly not a Communist at all, so they despised him and attacked him and trampled all over him, and he was as proud as anything.

It was just about this time that little Rose defied her mother and ran down the street in the rain to

look at the Dog Shop. Their house was on the top of the hill parallel with the Cathedral, and down to the market ran Orange Street, and half-way down Orange Street was the Dog Shop. There were always five or six enchanting dogs in the window. They were either asleep or playing with one another, or waiting for someone to take notice of them. Rose, who was only seven, would willingly have spent the whole day long standing with her nose pressed to the window-pane. There was one dog in particular — a Pekinese — with a flat nose and bulging eyes, which made Rose's heart ache so desperately with longing that it was practically the same as having a stomach-ache. So, because she had a cold, being left alone in the schoolroom and everybody being busy about their own affairs, she slipped out of the house, and stood without a coat and hat waving her hand to the Pekinese and getting soaked through. On her return, she was scolded, given a hot bath and put to bed, and that was the beginning of this extraordinary adventure.

Rose's cold became very bad indeed. For one day she had a temperature of 104, and was threatened with pneumonia, and sent dear Mrs. Heneage into an absolute panic of alarm; because, if you are really a mother, having ten children does not make you less fond of any one of them. However, Rose, who had the marvellous resilience of childhood, quickly began to recover and was soon convalescent.

It is here that Miss Golightly's part in the story begins. Miss Golightly was a tall, bony

lady of some fifty years, with a wild look in her eye. It is the tragedy of spinsterhood that the wild look which at twenty seems 'to promise something like genius,' at fifty simply means that you are an odd old maid. A good deal of loneliness combined with completely unsatisfied affections does undoubtedly lead to a kind of madness. Miss Golightly had sufficient means but very few friends, and, as I have already said, no capacity for making more. Her little house was neat, rather complacently in good taste, but empty, and Miss Golightly, as do so many people, turned her loneliness into a defiant, superior pride. She was on speaking terms with the Heneages over the garden wall, and Mrs. Heneage tried to be friendly. She invited Miss Golightly to tea, although Mr. Heneage objected.

'I can't understand you, Charles,' Mrs. Heneage said. 'You are a novelist, aren't you? Well, then, every type ought to be welcome to you.'

'Miss Golightly's type of old maid,' Charles said, 'has been done in novels so often, and she has nothing to teach any novelist.'

In any case, Miss Golightly herself refused. Very polite and dignified she was, rather like Queen Elizabeth to Essex after his return from Ireland. She did, indeed, fancy herself privately as a modern reproduction of Queen Elizabeth. She saw the Heneages as the people of Kenilworth offering her a pageant on her progress. So she declined the pageant with a great and courteous dignity. After that, however, her loneliness be-

came yet more acute when the Heneage boys were home for the holidays. The noise was terrific. She had to confess to herself, looking from her window into the Heneage garden, that they appeared to be jolly boys. But her heart was really lost to little Rose. She began almost mystically to consider how it would be if Rose were her own child, and from that, it was not a very difficult step to imagining that Rose *was* her child. She even, early in the morning lying awake (she slept on the whole very badly), seemed to have Rose beside her, and she would put out her arm and draw her close to her, taking care not to awaken her; hearing the soft whispering breath of sleeping childhood; feeling the warmth of her little body against her own bony one; and she would talk to her. 'I'm not going to waken you, Rose darling, but I'll be telling you in the morning what a wonderful time we're going to have. We'll do a little shopping first, then we'll go to the cinema in the market-place and have a high tea afterwards. You'll love that, won't you?'

In her saner moments, she thought it extraordinarily greedy of Mrs. Heneage to need so many children. When you had ten, one more or less surely did not matter. It would be indeed a kindness to relieve her of one of them. It was true that Mr. Heneage was now making a lot of money, she had heard, although for herself she could not read his stupid novels, however hard she tried. But the house was small, and one child less would make things more comfortable for everybody.

Loneliness is a quick breeder of fancies, and it

did not take long for little Rose to become an obsession to Miss Golightly. The child was a happy, merry one, and if she saw Miss Golightly walking up and down her garden or looking out of the window, she would sometimes smile or wave her hand. She would ask in the middle of a family meal:

‘What is the matter with Miss Golightly, Mother?’

‘Why, dear, what do you mean by “the matter”?’

‘Well, why didn’t she have her teeth pushed back when she was a little girl, as I did? And she has got quite a moustache, and when I smile at her she makes such funny faces.’

‘You had better not smile, darling; she might think you are laughing at her.’

‘Oh, no, I’m sure she doesn’t, she waves her hand back.’

If Mrs. Heneage had had less to do, this little conversation might possibly have alarmed her, but she was not alarmed. Miss Golightly began now to wait in a kind of agony for Rose’s appearance in the garden of a morning. If the weather were at all possible, Rose came out about half-past ten with a book and a large doll. If it were cold, she ran about the garden dangling the doll by the arm and waving it round and round in the air. She would stand quite still and then make sudden unexpected dashes at terrific speed right down the little lawn. This was because Tom, one of her brothers, had told her, with an air of great importance, that he thought she had a real talent

for the Hundred Yards and possibly the Quarter. This was not because he really thought so, but because at school he was frantically practising for the end-of-term sports, and thought he would use his young sister as a pace-maker.

This sudden sprinting of Rose down the lawn enchanted Miss Golightly; she thought she had never seen anything so lovely in her life as on a fine, breezy morning when the sunlight waved the branches of the Heneage apple-tree, the daffodils shook in the breeze, and little Rose ran like the wind, flinging her doll up and down in the air by the arm. Miss Golightly stood at the window and murmured, 'Do it again, darling, do it again. How I wish it was in my garden you were playing!' There grew in her then a feeling that she was being done some great injustice. Why was Rose kept from her? It was to her that Rose really belonged. Miss Golightly would be able to give Rose much, whereas now, as it seemed, the mother had scarcely any time to spare her. Miss Golightly began to see in Rose's responses to her greetings a great deal more than was really there.

Then Rose got her bad cold, and after a day or two of real anxiety, as I have said, became convalescent. Now, Mrs. Heneage's attitude towards her children's illnesses was brisk and practical. So long as the child was in any kind of danger, Mrs. Heneage threw everything else to the winds and gave herself up body, soul and spirit to her child's safety. But at the very moment that the child was out of danger, Mrs. Heneage began

to think of all the other multitudinous things that she had to do. She saw that the child was in comparative safety, that she had food, sleep and a warm room, and after that she left, as she always said, 'Nature to do her work.' So there came a fine spring day, and Rose was sitting wrapped up in a chair in the garden, looking at the sticky new buds on the trees, some purple crocuses in the garden bed, and a pale rosy mist that hung like a curtain in the sky, promising, like a lying, good-natured fortune-teller, that summer was close at hand. Miss Golightly's excitement, when she looked out of the window and saw Rose there, was intense. For the first time she spoke to her.

'How are you, dear?' she said. 'I'm so sorry that you have been ill.' Miss Golightly had an unpleasant voice, rather like a scratchy fountain-pen, but behind it was all the warmth and urgent longing to be loved of a lonely, romantic lady. Rose looked up and smiled and waved her hand.

'I'm ever so much better, thank you, Miss Golightly,' she piped; 'I'll be quite well now very soon.' It was at that precise moment that Miss Golightly was possessed with the Devil. She had her religious phases, when she saw the Devil as a rather plump gentleman in a handsome dark-blue suit, with that particular kind of little black brush moustache which always gave her a shiver to think of, bending over her shoulder and saying, 'Now won't you . . . why don't you . . . ? You had better try everything once, you know.' So long as these phases lasted, Miss Golightly was apprehensive with a delightful kind of fear, and if



the figure of the Devil had in actual fact been physically transmuted into a real plump gentleman with a black moustache, there is no knowing how far Miss Golightly might have gone. That, alas, never occurred. It was just the same now; there was the Devil again, only this time he was in the shape, strangely enough, of her old mother, long dead, who in a husky whisper murmured, 'Darling, darling, if anybody should have had a child, you should. I never knew anything so unfair; I always meant you to be happily married.'

'Yes, Mother; yes, Mother,' murmured Miss Golightly, 'tell me more,' and the old lady did, getting very close to her indeed, and saying, 'There's a sweet little girl, and she loves you, I know she does. Why not invite her to see your pretty little house?' Ten minutes later Miss Golightly was leaning over the part of the garden wall that fell in a sort of slant towards the plum-tree at the end of the garden.

'I do hope your mother won't think it impertinent of me, darling, but seeing you out and about again gives me so much pleasure.' Rose threw back the rug and walked across the lawn to the garden wall. She did this because she had for a long time wanted to see what Miss Golightly was like when you were close to her; whether there was really a moustache; whether it was true, as Tom, her brother, said, that she wore a wig. She also wanted to test her own legs, as does every convalescent. She tottered a little, but on the whole was surprisingly vigorous. For the first time in their lives they were really close to one

another, and Rose was surprised to find that Miss Golightly really wasn't so bad. The moustache was slight; her crisp grey hair was certainly her own, and she had nice, kind, affectionate eyes. Her real charm for Rose was that she resembled a little the French mistress in the day school to which Rose had recently gone for the first time. Rose adored this mistress for no very definite reason, and here was Miss Golightly — second best, but still, something.

These meetings occurred then on several mornings running. Rose did not realize, as Miss Golightly did, that she was meeting not only Miss Golightly, but the Devil as well.

Mrs. Heneage was very busy just then; the boys were away at school, Mr. Heneage was working on his book at the other side of the house, the mornings were warm; the Devil, as was so simple for him, arranged the weather to suit his own purpose. So that the day came when Miss Golightly and the Devil (in the shape of her old mother) said at one and the same time, 'Well, darling, come and see it, it really is a funny old clock. It has the moon and the stars, and the moon smiles every time the hour strikes.'

'Oh,' said Rose, 'how marvellous! But I don't think Mother would like me to go without telling her.'

'Where is your mother?' asked Miss Golightly.

'Oh, I suppose she is shopping.'

'It would only be for five minutes.'

Rose looked excitedly about her. She loved to do things without asking first; it was like the

visit to the Dog Shop all over again.

'All right,' she whispered, 'if you will help me over the wall.'

Miss Golightly leant over, lifted Rose up and let her down on the other side. As she felt the child's body close to hers, and the cling of the two little arms round her neck, her heart began to beat in a kind of frantic delirium. She had longed for that moment of experience all her life.

About half an hour later, Rose, standing in one of the oddest rooms she had ever seen, said, 'I think I must be getting back now.'

The room would, in fact, have struck anybody as odd. It was on the top floor of the house and on the opposite side from the Heneage garden. It was crowded with things. There was a bed with a handsome but rather faded lace counterpane. There was a table arranged for a meal, with bright-blue cups and plates. There was a large doll's house, and a clothes cupboard with open doors, so that you could see numbers of fresh brightly coloured children's dresses hanging in a row. Along the wall were pictures, usual to nurseries, of elephants in a circus procession; a large dog dying in the snow beside his master; two fat little girls playing with a skipping-rope, and Santa Claus climbing out of his sleigh. Most interesting of all to Rose was a large doll with a black face, sitting shamelessly nude on a small chair near the window. She thought at once that Miss Golightly had prepared this room for her reception, and that everything in it was a gift to her. This was quite natural, because whenever

in the past she had been shown things like these with the eager look of expectation which Miss Golightly was now displaying, they had always been presents for herself. It was Miss Golightly's look that deceived her. She did not know that this room had been thus prepared for a very long time, there being a dream child in Miss Golightly's brain, who would one day quietly ring the door-bell and say, in a shrill, piping treble, 'I've come to live here; God told me to.' Little Rose was frankly fascinated by the black doll, and, to a lesser degree, by the doll's house, but thought that she must now go home.

'Mother won't like it,' she said

It was then that Miss Golightly, standing just by the door, looked at Rose with an odd gleaming intensity and said:

'Wouldn't you like to sleep here just one night, darling?'

Rose gazed at Miss Golightly with bewildered fascination. She had never slept away from home in her life; it would indeed be an adventure. But she was a shrewd little girl, and began some bargaining.

'Do I get my supper here, too?' she asked.

'Oh, yes, darling, of course. What do you like for supper?'

Rose drew a deep breath. She was pretty, but she was also greedy.

'Oh, I like —' — she hesitated a moment — 'sausage rolls and those little puddings that have jam inside when you don't expect it. And trifle I like, too,' she added.

Miss Golightly beamed. What a dear, natural little child it was!

'You shall have all those things for supper,' she said.

'And is Black Boy mine, too?' Rose asked, having swiftly decided in the last five minutes that the black doll should be hers and that was what its name should be.

'Yes, Black Boy is yours, darling.'

'And the doll's house, too, and everything in it?'

'Yes, the doll's house, too.'

Rose grinned rather evilly. 'And no one will know where I am sleeping tonight?'

Miss Golightly looked quickly about the room. 'No one shall know where you are sleeping.'

'Oh, that will be fun! It will be really important, won't it?'

'Yes,' said Miss Golightly, 'it will be very important.'

Rose now realized with the alarming perceptiveness of seven years of age that she was complete mistress of the situation. There was a large book, with pictures of Hans Andersen's fairy stories, on the window-sill. She picked this up.

'Will you read to me now, please?'

So Miss Golightly began.

When the fat Heneage cook vigorously rang the bell for the midday meal, Mrs. Heneage, coming into the room, found her husband and all the girls except Rose.

'Where's Rose?' she asked Agatha, the eldest.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Agatha, tossing her head.

'Do you mean to say that nobody has been looking after her?' said Mrs. Heneage. 'I do think somebody . . .' She very rarely finished any sentence, and now hurried into the garden to fetch her little daughter. Her little daughter was not there. The rug was on the ground, and two sparrows were hopping near to it. There was a sweet, soft, warm silence in the garden. 'Rose! Rose!' Mrs. Heneage called. The two sparrows flew away and watched her from the garden wall. It was not a large garden, and it was quite clear that Rose was not inside it. 'Perhaps she has gone upstairs to wash her hands,' Mrs. Heneage thought. But Rose was not in the house; they searched it from top to bottom. All the girls, the cook, and the father and the mother, rushed up and down crying, 'Rose! Rose! Rose!' and there was no answer. They met in the dining-room and stared at one another over their neglected midday meal. 'Where can she be?' Mr. Heneage asked, his rosy, plump face looking strangely mottled and patched.

'I'm afraid she has been naughty again,' Mrs. Heneage said. 'I don't know what we are going to do about that—the moment our backs are turned. She has gone down to the Dog Shop again.'

They all trailed out, hatless, and feeling the first impact of that tide of panic that so quickly

floods the human heart. There was no Rose at the Dog Shop; the street was empty and lifeless.

'She wasn't strong enough,' Mrs. Heneage said, 'to go far. What *can* have happened?' She looked almost blindly through the glass into the face of the flat-nosed Pekinese, who stared back at her with all the haughty indifference of his Chinese tradition. Mrs. Heneage began to see things in a sort of mist. There were three Pekinese; the whole window rocked. They all trooped back to the house again.

'No, she hasn't returned, m'm,' said the cook, who had at once taken the darkest and most melodramatic view. No doubt the child had been kidnapped. American gangsters happening to pass through had seen the little sweet sitting by herself in the garden, had known that the child's father had just made enormous sums by writing a book. 'If you ask me,' the cook said, a little affronted because nobody had asked her anything, 'it's kidnapping, like you see in the pictures.' And she explained her theory.

'Nonsense,' said Mr. Heneage crossly. 'Do you imagine that anybody could snatch up Rose and carry her off without our hearing the child cry? No, she has been attracted by someone or something, and has walked off and been lost, in all probability.'

Charles Heneage, being a novelist, had imagination, and he began now to submit, against his will, to a series of the most horrible pictures. Rose herself had been transformed. He had always loved her best of his children, but now in

her sudden absence she seemed a kind of miracle of beauty and grace and strangeness. It was the strangeness especially that he felt, and he saw clearly that if Rose never did return again, that strangeness in his mind would grow and grow so that it would become an obsession. He saw in a sudden flash of almost supernatural revelation that his life would be completely ruined if his child were permanently lost. His imagination would be broken, and he would be tortured by an everlasting absence. But Mrs. Heneage was practical; she never built up imaginary pictures of the best or the worst, as her husband did. Rose was somewhere, and before night they would have her back.

At last, distracted, they telephoned to the police; and as dusk fell over roof and garden and road, transmuting everything into a mystery of grey mist and gold dust, so that the vanished child seemed in that dusk to be beside them and close to them, laughing in their ear, just out of reach, mocking, a big Scotland policeman arrived and peered into the twilight. Miss Golightly was thought of; she might have seen the child leave the garden. Her bell was rung; there was no answer.

'In the afternoon,' said Mrs. Heneage, 'if she herself is out, there is no one in the house. She is always back by between six and seven.'

Fear now began to stick its ugly fingers into the secret places of the Heneage household. After all, if Rose had walked out of her own volition, she was at least seven years old. She had been absent now for four hours or more. If she had



lost her way she would have enquired. No public accident had happened to her, because enquiries had been made at the hospitals; there was no child of her description in any of them. If, then, she had not lost her way nor suffered an accident, what possibilities remained? Obviously, trustingly, she had gone with someone — some stranger, and the thoughts that lay behind this, bred of the most dreadful newspaper stories — too frightful even to examine. Oh, no, no! *That!* — it could not be. *That!* — never. And yet, slowly, like a gaunt, white-faced, damp-handed old man, that Fear began to make itself an occupant of the house.

Rose herself, meanwhile, had been enjoying a very curious afternoon. For some while she sat there, half listening to Miss Golightly who, sitting bolt up in her chair, with a curious gleam in her eye, read a Hans Andersen story. For a long while Rose felt that this was an adventure indeed worth having. She did not think of the anxiety of her parents, because, above everything else, it meant that they would be thinking of her, and she was a little egoist to the roots of her being. And then, quite suddenly, out of Miss Golightly's mouth, as it were, there came a rush of tenderness, self-pity, and love of her mother and father. Her selfishness had broken down, and she saw them as though they were there in front of her. She could hear them calling her name. She got up and interrupted Miss Golightly.

'I think I'd better go home now,' she said.

Miss Golightly very calmly also got up, laid the book on the table, and said, 'Oh, no, dear, you must have some tea first. Besides, you are going to stay the night.'

Rose said, 'No, I think I'll go home now.'

'You must let me know what's best for you, dear,' said Miss Golightly. 'We'll have some tea in a moment and you'll feel so much better,' and without looking at her again, Miss Golightly left the room. Then Rose heard the key in the door being turned, and she was locked in. At the sound of that turning key, she became the baby that she really was. She screamed and screamed; she kicked at the door; she went to the window and pulled at it, but it was immovable; she smashed the doll's house; she yelled. There was no answer — a deathly silence, broken only by the chuckling slither of a dying coal in the fire.

At half-past six, on the other side of the garden wall, Police Constable Kellet found Rose's doll hanging in a raspberry bush. He then rang Miss Golightly's bell.

The door was opened by Miss Golightly herself; the policeman, Charles Heneage, and his wife, moved into the little hall. Mrs. Heneage explained with her charming, comforting smile: 'We are a little worried because Rose is missing.'

'Oh, yes,' said Miss Golightly.

'She is given to wandering off by herself sometimes, but we have made enquiries everywhere with no result. We thought that you might have seen her perhaps from a window.'

'Oh, no,' said Miss Golightly gravely; 'how very distressing for you!' But at that same moment a child's shrill, frightened scream was heard from inside the house. The door of the upper room was unlocked by Miss Golightly herself.

'It's a mistake, I assure you,' she kept repeating, her mouth twitching in a very odd way, 'a mistake, really, a mistake. Rose was having tea with me, that's all.'

The room presented a strange appearance, when the electric light revealed it. Rose, her small, plump face mottled with crying, was standing in the middle of the room screaming at the top of her voice. She held the black doll in one hand, and was whirling it round and round. The doll's house was kicked to pieces, and the cups and saucers and plates lay in fragments all over the floor. As soon as she saw her mother, she rushed to her and held on to her, her screams dying to strangling sobs. 'I want to go home, I want to go home,' she kept repeating.

Charles Heneage felt a sort of sick, inhuman rage. What he wanted to do was to go to Miss Golightly and take her thin, hard head and bang it against the wall until it broke into pieces, like the china. The policeman said, as though this were part of his day's routine, 'Well, there your little girl is, ma'am.' Mrs. Heneage sat down, taking Rose on to her lap and holding her closely. She looked at Miss Golightly and Miss Golightly looked at her: it was suddenly as though the two men in the room were of no account at all.

‘Why did you do this?’ Mrs. Heneage asked quietly.

Miss Golightly said, ‘I get so lonely in this house all by myself,’ and then, her mouth twitching so that it seemed difficult for the words to come out, ‘You really have so many children, Mrs. Heneage.’

‘And now,’ said the policeman, taking out a little book.

Mrs. Heneage had been staring at Miss Golightly so intently that she came together with a jerk as though she had been in a dream.

‘Oh, would you mind?’ she said to the policeman. ‘Could you wait for ten minutes?’

‘For ten minutes?’ said the policeman, greatly surprised.

‘Yes, it would be so very good of you — I won’t be more than that. I’ll take my little girl home if you wouldn’t mind waiting.’

Rose, seeing that now all was well, rather sorry that her adventure was over, and wondering whether she would be able to slip out of the house with the black doll without anybody noticing, wondered also whether she ought not to say to Miss Golightly, ‘Thank you very much for my nice tea,’ it having been already impressed upon her by various elders that beautiful manners cost you nothing and carried you socially a long way. However, there was still drama in the air, so that, with many strangled sobs and her own secret delight in carrying off the doll unopposed, she departed with her mother. Miss Golightly stood so erect, so still, that both men felt an awkward-

ness. The policeman said he would wait downstairs, and he left the room.

Charles Heneage was a novelist as well as a father, and the immobility of that figure seemed to him so tragic that some of his sick rage began to subside.

'I wish you would explain to me——' he began.

'Oh, I know,' said Miss Golightly quickly. 'I'm going to prison, of course ; this is the end of everything. Well, I always knew there had got to be an end. There's one thing — I shan't be quite as lonely in prison.'

Charles Heneage said, 'Yes, but didn't it occur to you that you would be making other people unhappy? We've spent a dreadful day, you know.'

'I'm sorry,' said Miss Golightly dryly.

'I wish you would tell me——' Charles Heneage said again gently.

'There's nothing to tell,' said Miss Golightly. 'I've known for a long time that something awful was going to happen. After all, it's only been an afternoon for you — I've had a life of it.'

And then there came to Heneage that consciousness offered to all of us from time to time, that behind the daily conduct of life, fearful abysses threaten — one step in the dark and you are over, so to speak. With imaginative vision he saw quite clearly that a terrific crisis was preparing itself for all of them, not only for Miss Golightly. She was ruined for life ; they, the Heneages, would be the centre for a little while of a police-

court case, and after it there would hang about in the world the suggestion that they had more children than they knew what to do with.

'Oh, of course, he's a novelist,' he heard the people saying, 'and you know what these writers are. Still, you'd have thought they would look after their children a little better than that.' And behind the gossip there would be his own lasting dismay that he had wrought unhappiness and misery, not through his own fault, but by submitting to circumstance. And Rose . . . He saw his child quite clearly. She had no longer the soft, romantic mystery of her absence. He knew Rose's faults; this might affect her whole life; she could easily become that most tiresome of all female types — the self-dramatizing *posseuse*. He could hear his little Rose saying, 'Oh, I was kidnapped — yes, when I was quite a little girl. A horrid old woman took me and locked me up in a room in her house. Oh, it was frightful; I screamed and screamed.' Beyond that, a sort of hatred and fear might be bred in Rose if this incident went farther. And yet, how could it not? Miss Golightly was mad, and mad people were dangerous. But was she mad? If this thing stopped where it was, she might be saved — they might all be saved. But then there was the policeman with his note-book. This had gone too far already. In a kind of despair he looked at Miss Golightly, and then he thought of his wife. Everything would depend on her; everything always had; she had a wisdom and knowledge that went far deeper than the immediate moment;

he had often noticed it — as though she were in communication with powers potent and invincible, and hidden from the knowledge of most of the sons of men. He said very quietly, 'We must wait till my wife comes back; she will know what to do.' Then he added, 'Won't you sit down?'

Miss Golightly said, 'Oh, no, thank you,' and then she added: 'I don't want your forgiveness; I can't forgive myself, and so what anyone else thinks doesn't matter. It was an impulse — as regards Rose, I mean. I had prepared this room for a long while, I don't quite know who for — someone to look after, to care for.'

'I see,' said Charles. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Heneage entered, the policeman close behind her. She was carrying in her arms the Pekinese dog.

'And now, ma'am,' the policeman said briskly.

Mrs. Heneage smiled at him. 'I don't think we shall be wanting you any more,' she said.

'Excuse me, ma'am,' the policeman said in his most official manner.

'No, really,' said Mrs. Heneage. 'You see, it has all been my fault. It was too stupid of me, but I do forget things in the most extraordinary way. Miss Golightly asked my child to tea days ago, and I knew all about it, and yet, in the most extraordinary way, it passed right out of my mind.' She smiled at them all. 'I'm like that, you know, so extraordinarily muddle-headed! Rose asked me whether she might go, and I said "Yes," and then it passed right out of my mind.' Nobody said a word.

'But really, ma'am,' said the policeman.

'Oh, no, we must thank you for your trouble. It has all been my fault. Charles——' She nodded towards the policeman.

'Well, of course, ma'am, if you refuse to prefer a charge.'

'There's nothing to prefer a charge about. All this afternoon I knew there was something in the back of my mind, and yet I couldn't remember. Charles——'

'I'll go down with you, constable,' Charles said, and he moved out with the policeman.

Mrs. Heneage put the Pekinese down on the floor. Miss Golightly said, 'I suppose I ought to thank you. I don't know why you did this. I didn't intend to hurt the child.'

'I think,' Mrs. Heneage said, 'that you would like to do a kindness. This little dog has been in the window of the shop down the road for days. I'm sure it has been most unhappy. It suddenly occurred to me that you might like to be kind to it.'

Miss Golightly looked at the dog; its grotesque face, with the bulging eyes, the flat nose, and the weary air of boredom seemed to her familiar. She did not move, but the dog, as though it were saying to itself through a million years' experience, 'I've learnt to take what I am given; this is apparently my destiny, for a little while at least,' yawned. Then it moved over to Miss Golightly, and, as it had been taught, with disdainful, scornful appeal, sat up on its haunches, waved its paws, coughed asthmatically, and looked into Miss



Golightly's face. Miss Golightly bent down and picked it up; it produced a minute scrap of tongue and licked her cheek; like Rose, it knew exactly where its bread and butter lay. On that, Miss Golightly pressed it to her bosom, felt its warmth, its minuteness, its helplessness, and at the touch of the rough tongue on her cheek, it became Rose — it became everything that she had ever needed.

'That's so good of you,' Mrs. Heneage said cheerfully. 'I can't tell you how distressed I've been every day passing that shop. I know how good you'll be to it.'

'Yes,' said Miss Golightly, staring at the dog, 'I will.'

Safe in the sanctity of their own home, Charles put his arms round his wife and kissed her.

'I knew you would do the right thing,' he said. 'You saved not only Miss Golightly, but all of us.' A moment later he shook his head. 'I'm not sure, though. Is it wise, do you think, to leave a mad woman like that loose in the world?'

'Not mad,' said Mrs. Heneage, her hand for a moment on her husband's cheek; 'not mad — only maternal.'

## THE BFARD



## THE BEARD

MR ANDREW WILSON was probably the best vergers that our Cathedral in Polchester had ever had. I can't at least imagine a better; he was the personification of all the vergers that ever existed, and he was of so much value to the Cathedral that people used to say that the authorities were thinking of sending him to Voronoff in Austria to have his youth renewed at their own expense.

He was a magnificent figure of a man — six feet two or three in height, broad-shouldered and wearing a simply superb beard. Beards have gone out of fashion now, and I suspect that the Victorians wore them mainly to conceal their moral delinquencies from their wives and families, because there is no physical feature that gives your character away as surely as your mouth. But no beard could be said to be out of fashion when it was so perfectly right as Andrew Wilson's — a glorious golden colour, cut most neatly, a little curly, vibrating with life.

That last is not, perhaps, a pleasant phrase to use about a beard, but it was true of the whole of Andrew Wilson — his vitality was of a certain very definite kind, and some people didn't like it. His critics called him complacent, a crushing bore,

even pompous, and I wouldn't say that from a certain angle these criticisms weren't true. But a cathedral verger ought to be complacent, and there is no harm in his being a little pompous, for he has in his charge a wonderful and beautiful thing, and it is his daily duty to impress rather lazy spectators with the glories of his charge.

When visitors came to Polchester and were staying in the little hostelry, someone would say to them, 'You've seen the Cathedral, of course.' Yes, or else they were going to see the Cathedral. 'If you go about eleven o'clock Andrew Wilson will show you round.' Who was Andrew Wilson? 'He's one of the Cathedral vergers. You don't half see the Cathedral if he doesn't show it you.'

And then how greatly were the tourists impressed when they saw him; the very first sight of him with his splendid beard resting upon his black gown, rather mild blue eyes gazing at you benevolently, his magnificently strong and upright body, and then the rolling unctuous voice, this patronage of you, and at the same time this conveying to you that he would look after you tenderly and see that you came to no harm.

There was, of course, nothing about the Cathedral that he could not tell you. To see him standing beside the tomb of the Black Bishop rolling out in his fine periods that terrific story: 'At that moment, ladies' (he always talked especially to the ladies), 'the great West Door was flung open. The four knights stood there, looking fiercely about them. They marched up the nave, their armour clanking as they went. The Bishop

turned on the altar steps. "What do you here, desecrating this house of God?"'

Yes, it was magnificent: the tourists stared at him with their mouths a little open — they did not know whether it was the Black Bishop they were admiring or Andrew Wilson or a little bit of both.

Naturally after many years of these great successes he grew to think himself indispensable to the Cathedral and to arouse the dislike of practically everybody in it. Certain Canons and their wives, and some of the other important people in the town, disliked him so intensely that even the most virtuous among them had considered the sending to him of poisoned chocolates by post. But short of some drastic action of that kind there was nothing to be done. He was grandly efficient, always there on the job; there was no criticism of his work to be made.

Pompous people are pompous for one reason only — they have no sense of humour about themselves; they don't see themselves as we all truly should, as comic and insignificant creatures; they never wonder whether they have not made fools of themselves and whether that is not rather amusing! They are very sensitive, and see insults where none are intended; they criticize others but are hotly indignant if they themselves are criticized; they suffer very often and move like baited bulls wondering why they are attacked.

Andrew was scarcely to blame for his pomposities because he had no one in his home to correct him, to laugh at him. His wife had died twelve

years before in childbirth, leaving a male baby, smiling up at him wistfully just before she went. 'I have loved you so much, Andrew. You will be good to our boy, won't you?'

Andrew had never married again, nor felt the least temptation to do so, and that was because he had loved his wife with a sincerity and passion which were deep and true and lasting. She would, indeed, have made all the difference to him had she lived, for she had a strong sense of fun and loved her Andrew with reservations. He cared for her so much that he liked her to laugh at him, but there was no one to laugh at him after she died — no one, at least, whose laughter he ever overheard. His youngest sister came to keep house for him, and unfortunately she thought him entirely marvellous; she had always worshipped him, and nothing he did or said was ever wrong.

The three of them lived in a house just inside Arden Gate, a little old house that was almost a cottage, from whose windows across the Green you could see the magnificent façade of the Cathedral, and across whose sitting-room and bedrooms the bells would come rocking, over whose roof as the evening fell the swifts circled. Agnes Wilson was an ideal housekeeper, saw that her brother had everything he wanted, including the right kind of food, for he was a very handsome trencherman.

Michael, the boy, went to the Polchester school as a day boy. He was a nice small boy with carrotty hair and a rather pale face, quite clever, and often

afraid of his father. Andrew painfully detected that his son was afraid of him, and this was the only thing in his life that disturbed him, for he loved his son most dearly. His son was the centre of his whole life, even more important to him than the Cathedral, and he would come home after his duties were done and sit reading the newspaper, his ears cocked for the opening of the door, for those familiar steps and then the sight of the small boy, and then his question, 'How have things been today, my son?'

When Michael had been very small he had run to his father and been hugged by him and kissed by him and held close to his heart; he never ran now, but would stand there smiling a little nervously and say with awkwardness, 'I was second in history today,' or 'We had rugger this afternoon and I got a try.'

Andrew did not understand his son. He could not help it. There were so many things about which he was anxious, and about nothing more than Michael's speech. He had a terrific pride about his own English; he loved the balance of sentences; he used long words which were not always quite correct, and especially did he loathe any kind of Americanism. There was a serious little scene one fine day after Andrew asked his son how things had been that day. Michael said very briefly, 'O.K., Father.'

'What did you say?' Andrew inquired.

'O.K.,' Michael repeated, his voice trembling a little because he knew he had committed a grievous fault.



'O.K.?' said Andrew. 'And what language is that?'

'It's American, I suppose,' said Michael.

'American; I see. Would you kindly tell me what it means?'

Michael, now desperately frightened, murmured, 'It is all correct — O.K.'

Andrew stood up. 'Let me hear you say that again,' he thundered, 'and you will be beaten. I have never beaten you yet, but that is what you'll get the next time. O.K. Disgusting! I suppose our own language isn't good enough for you.'

'No, Father; I mean yes, of course.' And he went shaking from the room.

Boys from the age of nine to nineteen are peculiar and not altogether pleasant animals. They suffer from a desperate self-consciousness. Their school puts them through the successive processes of subjugation, self-assertion and intolerance. They are terrible sticklers for a dreadful kind of code which is neither kindly nor honourable, and has almost nothing to be said for it.

They have loved their fathers and mothers, and perhaps even their sisters, and looked up to them. Their school quickly makes them ashamed of parents and relations and especially scornful of any kind of nobility or virtuous action: their school gives them self-reliance and courage. It is apt to eliminate from them all originality, all thinking for themselves, and to give them a completely false sense of values from which they will suffer all their lives. The only thing to be said for the English school system is that if a boy

doesn't endure it he will be worse than if he does.

Now Michael, being a day boy, escaped some of the more sinister things, but he soon learnt that to have a verger for a father was no very fine thing socially, and to know that his father was considered by everybody a pompous, conceited old ass at first hurt him dreadfully, for he had always loved him. Then he became accustomed to the idea and laughed with the other boys at his father's weaknesses. All the same, there were times at home when he found that his love for Andrew was as strong as ever, and he realized that Andrew loved him. So a sort of battle went on within him.

The ridiculous little quarrel about language had unfortunate results, for it was the use of elaborate language that made people laugh at his father. So he became sulky, and once when his father asked him why he gave such short answers he replied cheekily, 'I'm being careful about my words, Father. You said you didn't like Americanisms.' Then he was astonished, for he expected his father to be very angry, but instead of that Andrew Wilson said nothing, but only looked at his son in a puzzled, distressed way.

In fact, Andrew began now to be more unhappy than at any time since his wife's death. He was really, but he didn't know it, a very lonely man. He had no friends of his own age and standing. He was busy all day with his Cathedral duties and at night he read his newspaper, ate his supper, took a little stroll and went to bed. He played no games, he disliked strong drink, he

knew no friends. He had not thought that he was lonely so long as he felt a close companionship with his boy.

All day while he was showing visitors over the Cathedral, or, staff in hand, leading the procession to its place in the Choir, he would be thinking of the evening, of his talk with Michael, of their supper together, of his friendly supervision of Michael's homework, of his kissing the boy good-night when he was in bed. This was the climax and splendour of his day. It meant infinitely more to him, although that too he did not realize, than his Cathedral duties. These were important, of course, and he was as happy in his work as anyone in the United Kingdom; but the hour with his son was *the* hour.

Now that hour had lost its fun and savour. The boy answered him with monosyllables at supper, and even once turned his head away when his father bent down to kiss him. Therefore, because Andrew was unhappy, he was also cross and irritable. He knew in his heart what the matter was but would not confess it to himself, and his loneliness daily increased.

Nevertheless, what pleasure and excitement he got from the Cathedral! He was no poet, and his daily tributes to the Cathedral's histories and splendours were conventional enough. Although he knew the great building so well, it never diminished for him in size; and he would stand at the far end of the nave looking across the chequered floor, enjoying the muted colours of purple and orange and silver which came from the

high windows, taking as personal existences every brass tablet, every old letter stamped in the stone, every piece of marble and gold, talking of all the brave spirits buried there, of the pageant of history unrolled there. And behind all these was a very real sense of God, whose physical appearance strongly, in his mind, resembled himself, brooding tenderly and watchfully over everything and seeing that no one came to any ill.

He behaved very like a schoolmaster to the groups that he conducted, and he entered above all anything like an impertinent remark or light-minded question. Young women of the frivolous sort — especially those who were mainly occupied in flirting with young men attending on them — he disliked extremely and would often flash them a stern look from his blue eyes which terrified them and kept them speechless thereafter. He loved compliments, of course, and when a visitor remarked in a whisper to a friend, 'Isn't he grand?' or 'Doesn't he make things live!' he was greatly pleased, although he felt that these compliments were only his due.

There were certain things in the Cathedral that he could never explain. There was the little tomb, for instance, near the Black Bishop's, the tomb of a knight and his lady from the Middle Ages. Their small sculptured forms lay there quietly together in ancient marble. There was very little history attached to them. He felt always as though they were alive. When he came to them he would pause and say, 'This to my mind, ladies and gentlemen, is the most beautiful

thing in the Cathedral,' and when they asked him why, he did not know.

There was a window, too, in one of the side chapels, given by some mother two hundred years ago in memory of her small son, pictured in deep purple and green: The Healing of the Nobleman's Son. The boy on the bed sitting up to recognize his father always seemed to Andrew like his own son Michael, and he felt a kind of personal gratitude to the Christ for some personal kindness to himself.

All these things he treasured in his heart and spoke of to nobody. There was no impulse in him stronger than that proper English one, namely, that he should never make a fool of himself, and in so eagerly guarding against this he made, I am afraid, a fool of himself very often.

The relationship between father and son did not improve as the weeks went by. Michael was beginning to have some little success at school. He was sometimes impertinent to his aunt, and did not always keep his word about small appointments; he was half an hour late without apology, and seemed to leave the room whenever his father came into it.

Andrew for the first time in his life needed someone very badly with whom he could talk. His sister was of no use at all, for although he was fond of her and relied on her constant admiration for reassurance and comfort, that same admiration forbade him to respect her intelligence. She had also the maddening habit of saying, 'I see, I see exactly,' when she didn't see at all and would

never see. She was inclined also to take the father's side against the son. She did not in general like boys — they were untidy, noisy, and apt to get above themselves. She thought Michael was a fine boy, of course, because he was Andre's son, but, as she frequently remarked, he would never make the man his father was.

Yes, Andrew was now desperately lonely. He tried one or two acquaintances, but failed with them all. For instance, Mr. Bumpus, the under-verger, who was a thin, ascetic man with a large family of children, when Andrew said in an off-hand way, 'How are your boys?'

'Doing very well,' said Bumpus.

'Any trouble at home?'

'Not the slightest,' said Bumpus.

'Perfect in fact,' Andrew could not prevent himself from ironically saying, and this, of course, ended any friendly communication.

There happened to be at this time a very agreeable Minor Canon called Propert, a genial, amiable, broad-minded man, popular with everyone. Andrew, after some hesitation, said to him one day, 'I'm a little worried about my boy.'

'Why, what's he doing, Wilson?'

'Oh, he's doing very well. The masters all speak well of him. Doesn't seem so happy at home though.'

Propert grinned. 'The right kind of boy never is. Of course he prefers school.'

Wilson looked at the Minor Canon with his maddening I-know-better-than-you stare. 'He's a bit cheeky at times.'

'Boy — merely boy,' Propert murmured, which was no help to Andrew at all.

Queerly he discovered that he had never before loved his son as he did now. It was a strange, irritating, exasperating feeling as though his heart was moved all the more deeply because it could not get its proper satisfaction. At last, in desperation and very awkwardly, he tried one evening to break through the misty barrier. He drew the boy to him. 'Look here, my son, there's something the matter. We haven't been getting on lately as well as we should.'

Michael looked desperately all round the room like a small animal trying to escape from its cage. 'Sorry, Father,' he said.

'No, but why is it? My fault, I expect.'

'Sorry, Father,' Michael said again.

Andrew wanted to smack him: had to hold himself in with a special control. For a brief moment he hated his son as deeply as he loved him.

Then an awful thing occurred — a real catastrophe. Andrew came back early one afternoon and Michael had a half-holiday, so they met unexpectedly to them both, and Michael was perched precariously on a chair digging with his pocket-knife money out of his money-box. This box, in the shape of a dwarf with a large swollen forehead, Andrew had given his son the year before, telling Michael that it would prove the foundation of all his fortunes and that when he had any unexpected presents, anything in fact outside his threepence a week pocket-money, he was to put it into the

money-box. 'You'll be surprised, my boy,' he remarked in his very best manner, 'how in a year or two this will form a very considerable sum, and then it should be placed in the bank. Soon you'll be wealthier than your father. Ha, ha!'

Andrew had regarded these instructions in the nature of a command; it was as though he had said, 'Put your money in that box, my boy, and don't you dare to take it out again.' Michael, unluckily, had taken it in the spirit in which it was meant, and looked on the money-box with loathing as the greedy, unfair tyrant who would deprive him of all the benefits that kindly relations, or birthday-remembering aunts, or suddenly generous clergy bestowed on him. But he obeyed. It was exactly as though he had sworn an oath.

Andrew stood in the doorway for a moment and looked at his son. He could not believe what he saw. It was a vision, a mirage, an incredible fantasy; but it was neither vision nor mirage, for when Michael turned his head and beheld his father there, realizing that he was detected in an unforgivable offence, he was so seriously startled that he fell off the chair, bringing with him crashing to the ground a hideous but deeply cherished china vase painted with beetle and butterflies.

'I would like an explanation,' said his father.

'It's *my* money-box,' said Michael.

'You've broken your word.'

'I've got to get a cricket bat.'

'Why didn't you ask me for the money?'

'Because you wouldn't have given it me if I had asked.' Then he repeated defiantly, although



he was trembling all over, 'It's *my* money! It was given to *me*.'

Andrew's voice shook in spite of himself. 'It's as good as stealing. You promised me that you wouldn't touch the money. If I hadn't come in when I did, you would have told me nothing about it.'

Michael raised his eyes and looked at his father with hatred. 'I haven't told a lie.'

'No,' said Andrew, 'only because I happened to come in when I did.'

And then suddenly, as though a tornado rising from the quiet Green outside the windows had swept in upon the house, shaking it to its foundations, Michael burst out: it was as though he were seized with a demoniacal possession. He shrieked and screamed; he stamped; words came pouring forth.

'I don't care; I don't care; I don't care. It's my money-box and my money! You're down on me for everything. It's right what the boys say — they say you think no end of yourself and think you run the Cathedral! They say you're silly standing up there showing people round, and everyone laughs at you. They laugh at your beard. Mr. Clay told the boys you were pompous — that's what he said, pompous! And the boys imitate you, the way you speak and stand and everything. They all laugh at you. I used to stop them, but I don't any more, because I think the same as they do. I hate you! I hate you!' He burst into tears, rushing from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Andrew stood there for a long time without moving. Then he sat down; he wiped his beard and his forehead with his handkerchief, then getting up he bent down and very slowly picked up the pieces of the broken vase. Mechanically, without knowing what he was doing, he tried to fit them together.

Yes, it was a catastrophe. There are few people alive, I suppose, who have not experienced that awful sensation as of a cavern suddenly opening beneath one's feet.

The sensation comes after one has had a sudden and, as it seems at the time, irrevocable quarrel with a deeply loved friend or companion. The world has in an instant changed, nothing looks the same; furniture and pictures, roads and houses and trees have other shapes and colours. All the values in life are altered. However important other things had been only five minutes before, only one thing is important now.

For Andrew, nothing like this had ever happened to him before because his wife had been kind and spared him criticism, his sister adored him, and the tourists were always obsequious. Besides, he loved no one in the world but his son, and there is no position more precarious on earth than that of a human being who loves only one other human being.

The two did not speak to one another, and Andrew's sister was dreadfully distressed. She tried to make things better; gave Michael a long harangue, which only stiffened his obstinacy; told Andrew that the boy was a mere child and it

was wrong to take him seriously. She had, of course, no real knowledge of either of them and was quite unable to help them.

Every day now was a torture, and Andrew began to lose his power over the tourists. Summer came in and the Precincts were heavy with blossom, the air was mild and beneficent, and, above this scented colour, the ancient rose-red walls, the long stretch of sunlit Green, the Cathedral rose into the blue air triumphantly, defying time and all human mortality.

This was the active, eager period for tourists, always the months of the year to which Andrew looked forward most eagerly. But he was listless now; he told his tale perfunctorily. And soon there was something more than mere unhappiness. The words that his small son had hurled at him began to penetrate his whole being. Presently he was thinking of them night and day. They all laughed at him, did they? The small boys at the school imitated him; everyone thought him pompous. Pompous! What a horrible, ungracious, ungenerous word! When we have for many years prided ourselves on some special virtue, and an honest friend in a temper shows us that this same virtue is a ludicrous thing, not a virtue at all, that we have for years been laughed at for something on which we have prided ourselves, then we suffer desperately, and a little growth goes on perhaps.

Pompous! — by the very cadences of his voice, the rolling sentences, the fine long words, the little fragments of drama — all these things he

had loved and cherished. Now as soon as he began his famous story, 'At that moment, ladies, the great West Door was flung open. The four knights stood there, looking fiercely about them...' his voice weakened. He looked about, as though he was not certain of his next words: the picture was not created by him as, for so many years, it had been; the tourists were restless and whispered together. Pompous! The boys at the school imitated even his walk and the way he carried himself. Pompous!

He could not sleep now — he moved restlessly from side to side in his bed, seeing himself as the small boys saw him, and longing — aching, aching to be on terms with his son again.

Then one morning he shaved off his beard.

For Michael, too, that quarrel had been catastrophic. He was too young to analyse either his own feelings or his father's. He felt a horrible mixture of confused loyalties. He was proud that he had stood up for himself — there could not be many boys at the school who had talked to their fathers like that. But then he wished it had been someone else's father he had talked to rather than his own.

Unwillingly he felt a horrid dismay because of this quarrel; he did not know it, but this was a true and deep test of the love that they had for one another, because if that love had been unreal and without depth they would now have drifted apart as many fathers and sons have done, the breach growing ever wider and wider. But Michael had only one person in the world who loved him, and

he found that against his wish every day was dreary without that love.

This was no sentimentality or kind of unreal softness, but a true, practical thing, a bond that was built up of physical flesh and blood, many memories, enchanted hours, little self-sacrifices, struggles for honesty, and a real longing for physical contact, as, when waking as a small child in bed, you feel the dark terror and emptiness of the whole world around you and you call out for someone to reassure you.

Michael had now no one to reassure him, and everything at school was twice as harsh and unkind as it had been before. One afternoon a boy started an imitation of Andrew showing round the tourists and Michael rushed at him, tried to fight him clumsily, and did indeed gain some advantage because the other boy was so greatly surprised. Michael was himself surprised.

As the weeks passed the silence between them became more and more intolerable, and yet harder and harder to break. Then Michael coming home from school one late summer afternoon discovered his father sitting there without his beard. It was another man who was sitting there: a round-faced, chubby, mild, rather helpless man, with blue eyes, pathetic, a small soft chin.

Anyone who saw Andrew now would understand why it was that he had worn a beard. Michael stared and then went out of the room as though he had seen something indecent. He went and sat on his bed, thinking deeply.

His father had cut off his beard because

Michael had told him that the boys laughed at him. Michael knew this as surely as if Satan had whispered it in his ear. And now his father looked naked, helpless, as if asking for comfort because of what Michael had said. The boy felt a deep shame, an absurd overwhelming love and desire to protect, and a sort of cocky, arrogant sense of power.

That night Andrew had just put on his night-shirt (for he was still old-fashioned) and was standing there waiting to climb into bed when there was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' he said, and reached for his woollen dressing-gown.

In the doorway was Michael, looking very like a dressed-up baby in his pyjamas. He was carrying the money-box.

'I've come to say I'm sorry.' He stared at his father, fascinated, for now without a beard and in a nightshirt Andrew looked like a great, fat, helpless child, his yellow hair a little fluffy like a gosling's, his small chin an unsubstantial part of his round white face. 'Please, Father, I'm sorry.'

Andrew said nothing.

'I'm sorry I took the money out of the money-box, and I'm sorry I was rude.'

'That's all right, my boy,' Andrew said.

Michael advanced. 'I've brought the money-box because it's spoilt now. I've got five shillings I took out of it and you can buy a new money-box with that.' He held out the five shillings.

'I think perhaps,' Andrew said, 'that the money-box plan was a bad one.'

‘ I think it was bad,’ Michael agreed, speaking with stiff ceremony, ‘ because I am growing too old now for such things, but, of course, you may feel quite differently.’

Andrew looked at him, longing to stretch out his arms and hold him close to his heart; but at the same time something struck him, something very terrible. Michael was standing in such a way that he reminded Andrew of somebody; the elaborate tones of his voice also reminded Andrew — of whom? Of what?

With horror, he realized — of himself! There was a small-boy copy of the fashion in which he himself stood when he was lecturing to the tourists: the tone of that last sentence had been almost exactly his own.

He gave Michael a sharp look to see whether he had been mocking him, imitating him as he said the boys did. But no, Michael was perfectly serious. The boy threatened to be as pompous as his father! With a flash of vision Andrew could see his son holding forth at dinner-tables, laying down the law, balanced sturdily on his feet, pointing out some view or reciting some historical anecdote.

Michael, who had wondered why his father had said nothing more, observed, ‘ I feel, I’ather, that if I don’t have a money-box everything will be right between us.’

Andrew stared. ‘ Right between us,’ he repeated, then took his small boy by the shoulder and gently shook him. ‘ Don’t talk like that; don’t stand like that as though you were ordering

everybody about.' He continued to shake him gently, lovingly. 'Don't use those long sentences.'

He bent down to him, his round cheek almost touching his son's.

'All you need to say,' he whispered, lifting his son a little towards him, 'is O.K.'

He held him in the air, pressed him towards him and murmured, 'It's O.K. now, isn't it?'

'O.K.,' said Michael, grinning.





## THE LAST TRUMP



## THE LAST TRUMP

IN a dark little house — 17 Fawcett Street, Bloomsbury — lived the Brandreths.

There are still many houses in London where, it seems, all the dark scenes in Dickens must have been played — Quilp haunts the basements; Jonas Chuzzlewit skulks, crafty-eyed, from the mutton-reeking dining-room; Lady Dedlock watches the shadow of Mr. Tulkinghorn haunt the spidery ceiling of the little sitting-room.

The ghosts of Victorian muffin-men dim the pavement, and pale, straw-smelling cabs totter home to ghostly stables.

In such a little house lived the Brandreths, waiting for the end of the world. Their home had not been changed for thirty years — not only they, but everything in the house, from the pink china shepherd and shepherdess on the sitting-room mantelpiece to the old dark clock with the yellow spotted face at the bottom of the stairs, was also waiting for the end of the world.

The end of the world had been prophesied throughout the ages to take place exactly at 11.45 on the night of January 20th. It was strange, when you considered that the prophecies had been so universal, that only the Brandreths

and some half a dozen other persons were aware of the important fact. Not strange, on the other hand, when you consider the important things that only Sir Isaac Newton and Professor Einstein have known at different times — or even, if you wish to consider a little further, the strange things that only you know, as, for instance, how the birds that sleep in the trees above the Ramblas in Barcelona look like balls of silver, or that snails are best eaten with a flavour of lemon.

In any case, Mr. Brandreth — now a bent, silver-haired old bore of seventy — knew about the end of the world when he was twenty or so. He discovered it, in the first place, when in a temper with his mother. Because she had not cooked him Welsh Rabbit for his supper, he sulked in his room (while she, poor lady, loving him, hurriedly cooked Welsh Rabbit to soothe him), and worked out the date from the Books of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

He had had always a turn for mathematics, and it was late that night when, his mouth full of his desired toasted cheese, he made the astonishing discovery that the end of the world was arranged for precisely 11.45 on the night of January 20th, 1929. He went over his figures many times and found them quite correct, and, in the rather hectic dreams that followed the cheese, God, wrapped in a robe of silver wool, came to him and congratulated him on having made a remarkable discovery.

Brandreth, like the rest of us, had a character commingled of many opposites. We are largely what others make of us, and to those who found

Brandreth a bore, that was exactly what he was. But there were others who saw in his pale, thin hair, long, bony nose and sharp, watchful grey eyes a fascinating mystery.

He never said very much, and so seemed to be thinking the more. But as a matter of fact he was, for most of the time, not thinking at all.

All his life long he was clerk in a bank in Wigmore Street, and his natural ability for figures allowed him to do his work most efficiently and without any need for imaginative effort.

It was true, perhaps, that he had a good deal of the poet in him. One evidence of this was that he never felt the slightest desire to write poetry, and another that he bought, soon after his marriage, the china shepherd and shepherdess for no other reason than that he liked the look of them.

But he put no poetry into his relationship with God. That was as practical and accurate a relationship as his attitude to figures. His great discovery could not even be said to have made him a religious man — it only made him an extremely conceited one: and there is no conceit so all-absorbing as the one that must keep its reasons secret. He cherished his World-Destroying Date as another man would cherish a secret vice. It *was* for him a secret vice and gave him all the sense of luxury, the pride of rare personality, the rich incense-smoke of danger that secret vices give to their possessors. It gave him also an air of sacred mystery that irritated his fellow clerks, but attracted certain innocent persons, for the most part women. The clerks credited him with

hidden mistresses (and wondered how he, mean as he was, managed to keep them), and the women with hidden knowledge.

Mary Carter, an innocent child, living with her parents who kept a boarding-house in Kensington, fell in love with him and saw him in a fire of poetry and golden mystery. He liked her figure and, being a most moral young man, married her.

They went to live in Bloomsbury and there patiently awaited the end of the world. When Mary Brandreth heard the news it did not seem to her an impossible event. The world must end some time, her husband was the cleverest man she had ever known, and she was so certain of this that she would believe anything that he told her.

The date, moreover, was thirty years removed, and her only anxiety at first was as to the effect of the catastrophe on their children. When, after some years, it was clear that there would be no children, she was immensely relieved.

Mary Brandreth was, in the early years of her married life, a very simple woman. She believed utterly in the good Victorian doctrine taught her by her mother, that a woman only truly lived when serving her husband and children. She had received no regular education, but knew everything about how to help in running a boarding-house — that is, she knew how to deal with lying guests, ill-mannered servants, insolent tradespeople and an ailing mother. This knowledge made her in no way a cynic. She was a bright little thing when she married Brandreth. She

thought, on her wedding day, that a splash of Heaven had fallen on to her carpet and would never leave it again. Thirty years of marriage had destroyed her sense of magic. What did it give her in exchange? It gave her a permanent horror of conjugal embraces, neuralgia behind the right ear, a tolerant but amused contempt of men, and a sense that God was the head of a large banking concern and sat in a dark room counting up figures.

Although it in no wise disturbed the regular pattern of her life, it was nevertheless a memorable moment when she heard God's decision about the world's extinction. It was memorable for another reason — namely, that it was at this same time that she realized that she loved her husband no longer.

How does love disappear from marriage? Ask the innumerable banging of doors, colds in the nose, buying of things that must be paid for, white lies, and a too confiding physical intimacy.

The stars in their courses fight against the dying of love, but not always with success. Women are patient and blind because they wish to be. Men are selfish and consider love only part of a life. Poverty prevents separation, and monotony gives unreal importance to ears that are too red, complacences that are too stupid, preoccupations that are too selfishly trivial.

So Mary woke up on this foggy winter evening, when her husband was most offensively peeling an orange with his finger-nails and had forgotten, as he lazily informed her, to speak to the landlord



about the leak in the lavatory, to discover that her husband was less to her than a piece of dough, but that, on the whole, she would rather live with him than with anyone else. She looked about the little stuffy room, with the paper fans, the photographs, the china shepherd and shepherdess, and the picture of the Fall of Jerusalem, and sighed.

'I suppose,' she said, 'we shall go on like this, evening after evening, for ever and ever.'

'No,' he answered, chasing a piece of orange round his teeth with his finger, 'only until 11.45 p.m., January 20th,'

'Whatever do you mean, Henry?'

'Just what I say.'

A faint colour of excitement tinged his cheeks.

'No one will be living with anyone after 11.45 p.m., January 20th That's the end of the world.'

For a moment she thought that he had gone mad, and regarded him with a new interest, for she thought that she might begin to love him again, were he truly out of his senses; he would be a more romantic figure, would be more dependent upon her care, and would touch her heart again.

But no. He was extremely practical. He brought out his papers and proceeded to show her in his most lucid and bank-clerkly manner exactly why his calculations were so certain. They seemed to her to be so. She had no capacity for figures and an immense respect for her husband in that direction. Moreover, he acquired a new character as he talked to her. His thin hair seemed to glow, his nose showed a noble curve, his eyes had fire —

and this not at all because the End of the World seemed to him a poetic and romantic event, but because the mathematical accuracy of his figures inspired him. It inspired Mary also. She sat near to him at the table, her round, soft figure gathered into a kind of ball of eagerness. She was plump and pink, neat and amiable, then and ever. Nothing disordered her appearance. It was as though the necessity of appearing, for so many years, neat and undisturbed before her mother's lodgers had stamped itself for ever on her soul. Neat and orderly she would always be.

When he came to the end of his announcement and sat back with an air of completed triumph, she could almost have loved him again. Her sense of his cleverness swallowed up entirely any shock at the gravity of his news. Nineteen 'Twenty-nine! What a long way away! In three weeks it would be Nineteen Hundred. Thirty years! Why, Henry was already forty and she herself thirty-five. They would probably both be dead by Nineteen 'Twenty-Nine.

The years passed with incredible swiftness, but, oddly enough, the threatened date came no nearer.

As is fortunate for the aged, we live for the actual moment only. The past is dust, the future a fairy tale. Thirty years in Fawcett Street gave Mary Brandreth two layers of experience. The top layer was littered with things like bacon-rind, gloves in holes, holidays at Ramsgate and a book by the fire. The lower layer, which was concerned

with the growth of her soul, seemed bare enough until you looked closely at it. No one looked closely, least of all Mary. The truth was that she did not think of herself, but only of the things that, day by day, she must do. Love being gone and her life emptied of all personal relations, she busied herself with her daily duties — rise at seven-thirty, breakfast for Henry, slapping the house to keep it in order, choosing cabbages in the cheapest shops, a poached egg for lunch, slapping the house again, gossip with a shiny nose, a pair of pince-nez or a new pink blouse. (The shiny nose is called Miss Morrison, the pince-nez Mrs. Blunt, the new pink blouse silly Miss Scatchard.) Then Henry home again, Henry blowing on his soup, Henry reading the paper, Henry at her side.

So the thirty years passed and, were it not for the second layer, you might ask yourself (but Mary never asked herself) whether this is life. She had no curiosity about her soul. She went to church every Sunday at Saint Elizabeth's, Russell Street, and there, like the rest, she said that she was a miserable sinner without meaning it, and prayed for light to lighten her darkness without considering her words, because, for years and years, she had slept 'like one of the dead'.

There came at last a time when she did not sleep so well and — this was really irritating — Henry did not sleep so well either. Henry's nights were broken with a cough he had, and this cough became one of Mary's burdens.

It was a cough with a life all its own. This was strange about it — that it never came near

Henry in the day-time and always chose its moment for disturbing Mary when, after much difficulty, she had at last sunk into her first sound sleep. Kingdoms have been lost and won for causes less epochal than this cough. It was a cough with a history and progress all of its own. First it was a whisper, a murmuring, strangling suggestion of what was to come; then it hesitated, while the chances were balancing; then, deciding on action, it broke into the silence, angry, rasping, indignant, protesting; then it raged in shrill feminine uproar, then seemed to die away, returned again, more complaining than ever, faded at last with a long scratching, teasing anti-climax, sighing finally to its death.

Henry was rather proud of his cough than otherwise. He had all man's odd determination to applaud his possessions as magnificently unique, simply because they were his. Mary at last proposed that she should sleep elsewhere. Henry said very little, but showed her that he would strangle her, in that event, and count it no murder. So she remained.

But, lying awake and running races with the loud-voiced, yellow-faced clock, seeing the cough walk the bedroom in person, as a white-faced, spindle-shanked old man in a nightshirt, she began at last to consider her latter end, and, indeed, the end of all the world.

The years passed. There was the war, with air raids that shared the cough's idle irresponsibility, there was the rationing of sugar and butter, the death in Flanders of Mrs. Tallon's youngest

boy and May Cross's lover, there was the Armistice with its disappointing wet evening, there was 1919 and there was 1920 and there was 1921. Nineteen Twenty-nine was not now so very far away.

She began then consciously to share with Henry his secret.

They were now two old people. They had for one another that attitude, customary in human beings who have lived so long together in physical contact, of emphasizing half a dozen small things. Mary saw Henry as a Cough, a Pretence of Deafness when an answer would be a bore, a wearer of loose slippers, a master of accounts, and a lover of Welsh Rabbit.

Henry saw Mary as a spendthrift (which she was not), an incorrigible lover of idle pleasures (which she was not), and a dullard. Nevertheless, their secret — to which they never alluded — bound them together.

One night in the spring of 1922, Mary, wakened by the cough, had a sudden, startling conviction of Sin. She was a tender-hearted, generous woman and it came to her in a flash that they were behaving wickedly because they kept their secret to themselves. Here, in another brief year or two, everything would come to an end. How it would come, she had never in all these years considered. It might be Bang, like a shot from a gigantic gun, or it might be an immediate slipping into darkness and icy cold, or it might be a blast from a trumpet. Whatever way it came, it would be the End for millions and millions of

poor souls who, had they but known, could have made preparations, wound up their affairs, said their farewells to those whom they loved.

It was strange that never had she doubted the certain truth of her husband's calculations. For one thing, the fact had been with her so long that it was now part of herself, like the ache in the soles of her feet when she shopped, or the earache that came with an easterly wind. For another, she had an immense respect for figures and especially for her husband's mastery of them. He had made his calculations and he was never wrong.

*Well*, then — what about all these 'others'? Was it not awful that they should not be warned? Although she had no very close friends, there were yet a number of men and women for whom she cared. How could she face them, now knowing what she knew, and yet keeping it from them?

At last, after much considering hesitation, she spoke to Henry. Did he not think it right that some others should share their knowledge with them?

He was not, to her surprise, as scornful as usual. He had a way, when she suggested anything, of looking at her as though she were a candidate for the nearest madhouse, and it had been always one of the exasperations of their life together that, while he regarded her proposals with contempt, the merest neighbour might, afterwards, make the very same suggestion and be welcomed.

On this occasion, however, she caught a glimpse of something in him deeper than she had

for a long time realized. This had worried him also — his duty to others. Perhaps there had been some vanity mingled with it, the desire to extract from someone besides his poor imbecile wife awe and admiration.

He thought about it: for days he forgot his business and did what he had not done for many years — gave his imagination freedom. The possibility of telling others opened suddenly a new light on his own convictions. Incredulity, scorn, public laughter . . . after all, was he so sure? He had for so many years trusted confidently in his calculations. Now he renewed them all, spent hours of the evening at home in delicate comparing of prophecy with prophecy, of year with year, of text with text. His task was, of course, at the heart of it absurd. He was no Hebrew scholar, had no special knowledge of biblical criticism, trusted in the main to an old, faded brown volume, *Human Destiny as Revealed by the Prophets*, written by one Jacob Rampion fifty years before.

Indeed, he was too honest a man to cheat himself as to his own ignorance. He knew that he knew nothing — but it was this very ignorance that seemed to fortify him — ‘out of the mouth of babes and sucklings’. Someone had chosen him for this special knowledge. Had he been more of a scholar, he would have doubted more. Behind all the figures, the doubts, the hesitations, that certainly seemed to beat: ‘Eleven forty-five, January twentieth, Nineteen Twenty-nine — this is my word to you and you must keep it.’

He reached, indeed, now a very close personal

intimacy with God. This did not give him all the airs of a prophet. He remained, for his fellow clerks and all the outside world, a neat, white-bearded, reticent, sharp-tempered old man who knew his business and did it without an unnecessary word to anyone.

'Thinks he's God Almighty,' they sometimes said of him, but not because he was inspired, only because he was conceited.

At last, after much anxious thought, some six persons were informed. They were chosen with the utmost care: first, Amy Durham, an old maid who worshipped him and thought he could do no wrong; then James Saxton, a wizened old man who came in sometimes of an evening to play dominoes with him, and old Clara, his wife. Later there were three more: Rumbold, a cigar merchant, who had found God in a vision some ten years back — he was the only visionary of the little group; Jane, his daughter, a simple-minded girl who believed anything her father told her; and old Miss Turtis, a friend of Mary, and so desperately afraid of God that she looked under her bed for Him every night before climbing into it.

There they were — Amy Durham, James and Clara Saxton, William Rumbold and his daughter Jane, and old Miss Turtis. They all, for different reasons, believed in Henry's statement, being, in fact, like most human beings, only too ready to believe in anything, were they only let alone.

There was no appearance among them of religious sectarianism; there was no appearance of



any religion at all, but, as time wore on and the date approached more nearly, they formed ever more strongly the habit of staying close together. They did feel that they were marked out from the rest of the world. William Rumbold, who daily walked with God, had long worn the air of a mystic, although nature had ill designed him for the rôle, making him square of figure and stout of belly. Miss Turtis became a little mad, waving her hands in the air and talking aloud to herself in the street; the others stayed outwardly unchanged.

Mary, who was old and often in pain and always with too much work to do, found that she awaited the date with increasing eagerness. Life had not given her so many delights that she should shrink from leaving it. She was weary of the monotony of events, the scantiness of finances, above all of Henry.

Whether there were another life or no — and of this she could never be quite determined — the probabilities were that, after January Twentieth, Nineteen Twenty-nine, she would be relieved of Henry's cough, of his complaints about his meals, his exasperating habit of scratching his beard, his certainty, so often expressed, that she herself was a fool.

When the Last Trump sounded, Henry would go with the rest, and it would surely be to credit Providence with too persistently malicious an attention to details to suppose that she should still be compelled to remain with him. Every night now, when he awoke her with his cough, she counted the months to her relief from it, and, lying

there beside him, watching his thin body shaken with it, stepping out on to the cold oilcloth to fetch him his drops, she would mutter:

‘Not much longer, Henry.’

As time went on, she became extremely weary of the rest of the group — Miss Turtis with her holy mutterings, Rumbold with his stout ecstasies that were like so many stomach exercises, the Saxtons with their air of being in on an especially lucrative betting transaction.

She was kind of heart, but desperately, desperately fatigued. The thought that, in another year and a half, the buying of cabbages would be over for her for ever was as strong a relief to her brain as her evening cup of tea was to her body.

On Christmas Day 1927, she and Henry had a word or two. He had invited the Group for a quiet Christmas evening. Mary had been willing enough that they should come, had even prepared a little supper for them, but, when at last they were there, eating and drinking as though they would never have another Christmas meal (and they would, poor things, have but one more), eyeing each other with a sort of tyrannous intimacy (as though they despised one another but were held together and must put up with it), she felt that it needed all her self-control not to slap their faces and bang their heads together. Afterwards, they played cards for infinitesimal points and squabbled over their gains and losses. It looked bad, because Henry and Mary had won more than any of their guests and, although the winnings were but a few shillings, the principle was the same.

Mary, in spite of her round, rosy placidity, was very grim. After the guests' departure, Henry, moving bedwards, threw over his shoulder:

'Never knew you so grumpy. What was the matter with you?'

'Sick of it,' Mary answered, 'simply sick of it.'

'Sick of what?' he asked her.

'Everything. Every day. Every hour.'

He was shocked.

'That's blasphemous,' he said.

'Anyway,' she answered, 'there's only another year of it, thank God.'

That made him very angry. By tacit agreement, they never alluded to the Event. He scolded her volubly. At the end of it she simply nodded her head.

'It's all very well for you, Henry. Your work interests you, but I've got nothing. You're as wearisome to me as all the rest — you and your cough.'

This shocked him so deeply that he could say nothing, but only stood there, a pathetic figure perhaps, with his bones and untidy hair and mouth gaping.

Then, as the year advanced, she discovered that there was something she was afraid of. Of what? She could not conceive. Certainly not of death, for, if it were an eternal sleep, it was a blessing, and, if it were something more active, then at least there would be a change.

Certainly it was not fear of leaving anyone, for there was no one to leave. There was no lonelier

person in all the world than she. She had not now a friend in the world, and to leave Henry would be a miracle of relief. She was no poet. She did not see the world as a masterpiece of stars, tapestries and cloth of gold, but rather as a messy arrangement of unwashed plates, unpaid bills, and 'shooing' the cat.

She was no investigator. She had never asked the reason of anything in her life. She was no ironist — the sense that life was a ridiculous affair gave her no satisfaction at all.

No. . . . And there it was. One day she would discover what she was afraid of and then it might be too late.

When the foggy autumn days arrived — days when every London face seemed the ghost of every other — the Group began to show nerves. They kept ever closer the one to the other. They led lives of the most scrupulous purity and honesty, they guarded every word that fell from their lips and spoke most kindly of their neighbours.

No one of them had any near and dear to leave behind them, but they began to develop a curious affection for everyone whom they encountered, as one does on the day before a long journey into a distant and perilous land. It was now a regular thing for them to meet in the dingy little house in Fawcett Street every evening. Henry and Saxton played dominoes, Miss Turtis patience, Mary worked about the house. They said little to one another, for what could they say that was of any kind of importance?

Every event, whether it were King George's

illness, the cricket in Australia, the sad plight of the poor miners in Wales and Northern England, reached triviality in comparison with the approaching End of Everything. They developed, indeed, a kind of grim interest in the King's sickness. Poor man! Did he but know the vain uselessness of all this struggle! At one time eleven doctors came to see him! What an expense and all for nothing! Little Miss Turtis felt very badly about it indeed. Once and again, it was announced that someone had committed suicide. Here most truly was wasted effort!

Mary alone found that she could take no interest at all in any outside event. So tired and exhausted was she that she could scarcely think. Dimly, sometimes, she speculated on the nature of the event. Would it be a fearful explosion? She did hope not. She could not abide a sudden noise and always put her hands to her ears in a theatre when anyone handled a revolver. But the relief, the blessed relief! No more Henry, no more Cough, no more drying of dishes, no more shabby shopping, no more earache, no more . . . And yet, and yet . . . There was this doubt, this hesitation. Some discovery that she would make. Something that she had yet to learn. . . .

Christmas evening was damp and disagreeable. They sat, all of them, about the fire, quite silent. Not a word was spoken. When twelve struck, they whispered one another good-night and crept away.

A clear, sparkling, brittle frost caught the town. London was crystallized, suggesting like

a frosted mirror that a magical view hung only just beyond sight. You walked the streets as though their walls were hung with the sparkling globes of the Christmas-tree, and, in the little squares where no sun came, the thin rind of frost lay all day on the sheet of green. Everyone was expectant, but of what no one knew. King George V was better in his health, the cricketers played well in Australia, and so Englishmen were happy. It is true that the miners were uncomfortable, but that trouble would right itself very shortly.

January 20th, arrived and was damp and foggy once more. Expectancy was over. Once more the promise of beauty was not fulfilled. A young man in Paris on his honeymoon wrote discontentedly in his diary: 'At the Louvre. The Gioconda has a smut in her eye.'

Someone in Stockholm, a painter, discovered a new way of immortalizing the right shade of purple. In Rome a lady lost her Pekinese, in Granada some Americans from a Mediterranean cruise, while visiting the Alhambra, thought of a new fancy dress for the dance aboard ship tomorrow night. All these were important events to the persons concerned. In 17 Fawcett Street, Bloomsbury, London, the old yellow-faced clock struck eleven-thirty. The Group was gathered round the table with the faded red tablecloth that had a hole in its right-hand corner. Miss Turtis, Mr. Rumbold and his daughter were praying, Miss Turtis aloud, but the Rumbolds with their heads bowed. The Saxtons, James and Clara, sat

with their hands clasped. They looked at one another dimly, but with eyes of love. Their lives had been, to any outside person, completely useless and uninteresting, but, for themselves, both dramatic and eventful, for they had discovered with every month that love, when it really sets to work and intends to make a good job of it, can pierce depth after depth of new experience and that there is no end to its discoveries.

Not that they thought of it like that. They only held hands and waited in perfect confidence. It was for them as though they were moving out of one house into another one. And so long as they were together it did not matter to them what sort of house it might be.

Mary, looking at them, envied them. How wonderful could she but feel like that about Henry! But, looking across the table at him, even at this ultimate moment, he irritated her.

He was sitting there, his hands folded in front of him, in a state of maddening self-complacency. The great moment of his life had come — not at all because he was about to meet his God, or pierce the splendours of Heaven, or answer once and for all the great overwhelming Question — simply because, in another ten minutes, the cleverness of his mathematical calculations would be proved.

Yes. Mary knew what he was thinking of. Her own thoughts were too wearily confused for any summary. She was thinking perhaps of nothing at all, except of the intense relief that the End would bring her. Or was it that? Was there

not an apprehension? She moved restlessly, clasping and unclasping her hands.

Their eyes were now all fixed upon the clock. There was absolute stillness save for its ticking. No sound without the house or within it. Mary's thoughts ran to old Ellen, the 'char', who came in the mornings to clean. They had had many relations together during these years, Ellen and Mary. Relations friendly, hostile, humorous, pathetic. It had been cruel not to tell her. But was it cruel? Was it not better for her to move unconsciously, not knowing, asleep by now . . . ?

The hands moved. Six minutes, five, four . . . Miss Turtis cried out with a sharp hysterical whine:

'Oh God, receive me, receive me into Thy Kingdom! Oh God, receive me, receive me!'

She sprang to her feet, staring at the clock. The clock, that was now, for them, the only thing alive in the world, gave the little drunken twisted whirr that always came before it struck.

'NOW!' cried Henry, leaping to his feet, his eyes on fire.

The clock wheezed the three quarters — then, after another little chirrup of self-satisfaction, went on quietly ticking. The silence was as profound as before.

Nothing had happened.

They waited in silence for five minutes, ten, then the clock struck the hour. They listened to all the twelve strokes. They heard dimly from the church, two streets away, midnight sound. Then Rumbold rose.



'I fancy your calculations were out, friend,' he said, then got his hat and coat, and, followed by his daughter, stole away. The others, without a word, followed them.

Henry and Mary sat at the table for an hour longer, and no word spoken. At last Henry, his face dulled, blanched, his eyes weary, his voice wretchedly dejected, murmured:

'The figures were wrong. It was like Rumbold said. I miscalculated. All these years I've been cheating you.'

Then Mary knew. A flood of warmth, of exhilaration, of discovery swept over her. *That* was what she had feared — not death, not pain, not punishment, but leaving the little daily things — the plates, the cough, the shopping, the London streets, the barrows of fruits and vegetables, the pages of the *Daily Express*, the buying a new ribbon for her hat, the smell of eggs and bacon, the chatter of a morning with Ellen, even the pains and weariness, the earache, the weariness of the feet, the damp of a wet day, the climbing of the stairs at night — everything was to go on after all. She was old, but there would still be some years of it, years of Fawcett Street and Henry, and light and dark, sleep and waking. She would not leave them, they were with her still. She was happy as she had never been since she was a young girl in love.

He stole a frightened look at her. She would laugh at him now, the one thing that he always feared.

'You'll despise me now — deceiving you so.'

She looked at him. She did not love him any more than she had done. It was not love that she felt. But she was glad that he was there, just as he was, just exactly as he was.

He began to cough. She slowly climbed the stairs to the bedroom, to fetch him his drops.



**GREEN TIE**



## GREEN TIE

THINKING of the tight corners in which I have stood during my now long life, I am surprised to find that it is not the most adventurous that comes the most readily to mind.

What! Not that moment when I crossed by mistake into the Austrian lines and was almost shot for a spy? Not that dreadful night when I fell into the Mersey off the Liverpool Docks? Not that famous occasion when I faced the murderer, who . . .?

Not at all. The worst tight corner of my life was during the dreadful two minutes when I saw my existence tumbling in fragments about me, when socially it seemed I was a ruined man, when . . .! But, as they always say in these stories, you shall hear.

You will also, if you listen, discover why it is that I have so strong, so inartistic, a passion for green ties!

It all happened years and years ago, and yet the agony of it is as sharp with me now as it was then. Not that if the same tight corner occurred to me today I should give a rap.

No, advancing years have some advantages. The point of this story is youth, the agony of it is

youthful. If you don't understand *that* you will get nothing out of it at all.

I was indeed very young — twenty-three years of age — and about to publish my first novel. All my life was in front of me, and of that exciting fact I was very well aware.

I was invited to my first house-party. Today I detest the very thought of a house-party, but then I didn't, of course, know very much about them.

When I realized that Lady Grandison asked me to stay at Sacriston Park from Saturday to Monday I was in an ecstasy of happiness and a shivering agitation of nervousness.

I will be frank and admit that in my youth I was something of a snob. I had been brought up in the country, where the good abound but not the great. The great of any kind — titled, artistic or rich — seemed to me at that time very wonderful. They added a glister to the gold of life. How I wish that they did so still for me today!

I had met Lady Grandison at a luncheon-party in Somerset Maugham's beautiful house in Charles Street. I had chattered away to her in my innocent, simple way.

Maugham, with his generosity of kindness, had asked her to be good to me. And so she was. She invited me for a week-end.

She was a tall, full-bosomed, highly-coloured lady; I remember her wearing at that luncheon an enormous hat covered with flowers, and a genial, rather vacant smile.

When I arrived at Sacriston and found them

all having tea in a long room whose walls were covered with books, whose floor was covered with Pekinese, whose tables were covered with cakes, honey, jam and watercress sandwiches, she still wore the flowery hat and the genial, vacant smile.

I was introduced and forgotten. I sat drinking tea and observing. Lord Grandison was a short, stout man, who barked very like a seal before his fish dinner. He had large bluebottle eyes, and hands unexpectedly as soft as a powder-puff.

Before I took refuge in my huge and bitteriy cold bedroom (in those days bedrooms in country houses were as cold as ice-pudding), I had ascertained that the house-party was small and exceedingly select. Lord and Lady Gunter (young, horsy, wealthy), a Cabinet Minister, whom I will call Mr. Black, and his lady, an elderly bachelor named Butterby and nicknamed Winks by everyone, a society beauty, Miss Alice Featherstone, and a meek, obsequious little man to whom no one spoke, Mr. Bond.

We were a gentleman too many, and I quickly saw that it was between myself and Mr. Bond.

Mr. Bond had no chance at all. I was young, and although not exactly good-looking, had a fresh eagerness and charming naiveté about me that were striking. I was ready to enter into any conversation whether I knew anything about the subject or not.

I said always what I felt would be pleasing to my companion. I had no intention of being false in any way whatever. I only wanted to be liked by everybody and felt it right that I should be.



By midday on Sunday I knew that all was going very well indeed. I had driven to church with my host and hostess and Mr. and Mrs. Black in the morning, sung the psalms and hymns with a tuneful fervour, and discovered that Mrs. Black was devoted to the novels of Mrs. Humphry Ward and Italian painting.

I knew everything about Mrs. Ward's novels and nothing about Italian painting, but Mrs. Black was a sentimental, inaccurate lady, and made quite as many mistakes as I did. On the way back from church she said that she hoped I would lunch with her in London.

Of Miss Alice Featherstone I also thought that I made a conquest. It is true that a week or two later one of those unfriendly friends told me that she had said of me: 'Oh, *that* young man! Isn't it odd that even the nicest people are such bores sometimes?'

But I didn't know that, happily, during the week-end. Miss Featherstone had been told for so many years by the press that she was the most beautiful woman in London, that she was like a fly in amber, and nothing that she said was real. The fly had been embalmed years ago!

Of Lady Gunter also I made a conquest. She moved like a horse and showed her teeth and flashed her eyes, but if you were ready to listen to her hunting stories and never utter a single word while doing so, she liked you very much indeed. She told me before the day was ended that I was a 'dear'.

In fact, by the evening of the Sunday, I knew

that I was a success. Even my host barked at me once or twice approvingly.

It was on Sunday evening after dinner that something happened. Our host opened a bookcase and produced a book. It was not very large. It was bound in old black leather covers. It was exquisitely beautiful. It was the Sacriston *Book of Hours*.

Not only was it exquisitely illuminated, but it contained some forty pictures all in the most perfect state. It had been in the Grandison family for eight hundred years.

We all admired it, and no one more than I. I was, in fact, very exuberant indeed.

At last Grandison put it back in the bookcase, which he locked, leaving the key in the lock.

Wasn't that, someone asked, very dangerous? Anyone might steal it. Oh, no, Grandison said. The book was too famous for it to be of any value to anyone. No one could possibly sell it.

'Perhaps,' said little Mr. Bond, 'someone might like to have it hidden somewhere and just look at it occasionally.'

This remark was rightly derided by everyone. I understood what he felt, though!

Next morning we were all gathered at the breakfast-table ready for departure. In those days motors were rare indeed, and we were all to be driven in the family omnibus to the station at Little Wallflower.

We all of us perceived very quickly that our host was in distress. He scarcely answered when spoken to, he looked at one after another of the

party with strange searching glances.

At last he burst out:

'A dreadful thing has occurred. The *Book of Hours* has been stolen.'

We screamed and growled with dismay, according to our sex. It had been safely there last night as we had all seen. It was not there this morning.

The servants? The servants had already been searched. The house also — 'from attic to cellar,' as the Victorian novel puts it.

There was a painful pause. He continued to regard us. Miss Featherstone said the right thing: 'Why, you must search us too — *and* our luggage!'

Our host and hostess mildly protested, but we could see that this was what they were longing to do. Into the hall we all marched. The handbags were there waiting — also a butler like the busts of Socrates, and a young country-coloured footman.

There was a good deal of nervous laughter as each guest in turn opened his or her bag.

'Of course, this is ridiculous,' said our host, eagerly gazing at every bag.

'It's *too* absurd,' said our hostess, especially watching the ladies.

My turn very quickly came. I had my bag in my hand. It was a new one of bright brown especially bought for this occasion.

'Now, young man,' barked Grandison with genial friendliness. I opened mine with a flourish. There on the top for everyone to see, was the *Book of Hours*.

As I have already said at the beginning of this little story, I count the minutes that followed the worst of all my life.

Two minutes! They were indeed an eternity. And I was, in the course of them, able to realize a whole world of social truth. I perceived that, on this planet of ours, we fight a battle with wolves and tigers, with cats and monkeys. We are ourselves of that same menagerie. One slip and you are down, thrust into a pit.

But why go on? I am exaggerating. We are all kind and good, cruel and selfish, at one and the same time. We have to be, in the noble cause of self-preservation.

I stammered, 'But I didn't — I couldn't — I wouldn't!' The figures around me were turned into stone. The kindly, motherly Mrs. Black looked at me as though I were some kind of hissing adder.

'Well!' gasped Gunter. 'Who would have thought——'

I was finished for ever. My career was over ere it had scarcely begun. I felt that I was going to be sick. My eyes were filled with tears. My throat hot and burning.

I was finished. I had better go by the next boat to the Colonies, who also, when they knew of this, would eject me.

'Would you mind,' said Grandison, 'returning me my property?' I handed him the book. I was beginning to sob and, to hide my shame, I turned to my bag.

Oh yes, I know! I should have defied them

all! I should have had them in the courts for slander. I should have . . . But I didn't. I turned to fasten my bag.

And then I saw! Hanging over the tip of the bag, disturbed by my quest, was a green tie! A green tie! A green tie! I had never owned such a thing in my life! Never! Never! Never!

I caught it up. I waved it in their faces.

'This isn't,' I cried, 'this isn't my bag!'

It wasn't. On the marble table facing the door was a bag exactly like mine.

It belonged to little Mr. Bond.

You understand, don't you, why it is that I have a weakness for green ties?

## THE CHURCH IN THE SNOW



## THE CHURCH IN THE SNOW

ROBIN HERRIES, when a very young man, paid his first visit to the South of England. On a wintry day in the northern part of Glebeshire snow began to fall, to his astonishment, for he had understood that in Devonshire, Glebeshire and Cornwall snow was a great rarity, even in the extreme of winter.

It was falling now with great thickness. He dismounted from his horse and studied the drawn map that he had purchased in London. This was a rough map in red and black, with dolphins sporting in the sea, and a fine barque in full sail on the horizon.

Nevertheless, it was excellent in its detail and he repeated to himself with pleasure the names — Rasselas, Pelynt Cross, Treddon Cove, St. Mary Moor. Where was he now? He looked over the bare, bleak landscape, felt the snow stir coldly on his cheek, and then, pushing it from his eyes, saw most unexpectedly, quite close to him, a little grey church.

He stared hard lest it should be some hallucination, for he had been riding along a straight road for a considerable while, looking in front of him, and had seen nothing at all. There it was. There could be no question — small, sturdy, with a bell-



tower, and, close beside it, a grey donkey tethered to a stone wall.

He looked again; he must be near Garth-in-Roselands. Yes, and here, on the map, was the church — St. Michael and the Angels. That path to the right must lead to the village of Garth, and so beyond it down to Rasselas and the sea.

He would take shelter in the church for a while, until this storm should be over. He walked across to it, leading his horse, found the door open and entered. Within, on one of the benches, a little table at his side, was seated a short, square-set priest, and the priest was painting on a board.

Robin had tied his horse to the wall near to the donkey and now he walked up to the priest.

‘Forgive me for my intrusion,’ he said, ‘but it is snowing and I thought I might shelter here until the snow was over.’

The priest looked up at him smiling. He had the merriest face, brown and wrinkled, with an ugly, humorous mouth and soft grey eyes. Catholic priests now, at this time in Elizabeth’s reign, were rare: the most of them had been robbed, disbanded, turned out into the world for ruin and corruption.

Robin looked over the priest’s shoulder and gave a little cry:

‘How beautiful!’ he said.

Praise is pleasant from anybody, and here was an elegant gentleman, in black and silver, little more than a boy, who very certainly meant what he said. The priest was delighted.

He was certainly a master artist. The painting

was for a window. The colours were broken into little squares and oblongs and were exceedingly brilliant. The scene was of a meadow in spring, thick with hawthorn blossom, and on the slope of the field a stout, elderly monk was kneeling. Near to him, another monk was standing, his hand on the rough neck of a patient donkey. Robin saw at once that this monk was the little man at his side and that the donkey was the one that he had seen near the church.

‘There is to be a window,’ the priest explained, ‘in memory of our Abbot — Abbot Anastasius — who was a very good and worthy man. Our monastery of course is dissolved, but some of us yet remain there although it is in ruin. We have permission. Yes, we are still living in our monastery at Royle Pardeu, two miles from here, by permission of the Queen, because we are Franciscans and have done no evil and are not concerned with any policies. I am the painter of this Group of our Order. That is Abbot Anastasius,’ he said, pointing to the picture. ‘and here am I, and here is my donkey, Margaret. For they wished that there should be some other figures, and why not myself, who loved the Abbot as a son loves his father.’

‘And you make the windows in the monastery?’

‘We are famous for our stained glass — such reds and purples and greens as ours are not to be found anywhere in the rest of England.’

Robin marvelled at the painting for the brilliance of its colouring — the green of the meadow,

the snowy white of the hawthorn, the blue of the sky and, round the base, in purple lettering, the name of the Abbot and the date of his death.

He felt at once a warm kinship with the priest. Religion had been always of deep interest to him: he was unlike his big brother, Nicholas, who cared for none of those things. He sat down beside the priest, who told him that his name was Brother Andrew, and before he knew it, Robin was telling him all about himself and his life.

He was by nature reticent and reserved. He cared greatly for reading. He loved his home in the country, Mallory Court, where the pleached hedges were so warm, the flowers so fragrant, the splash of the fountain so musical. The three people he loved most in the world were his father and mother and his brother Nicholas. His brother was a giant, the strongest man in England, the best, the bravest, the noblest hearted.

Himself, he thought that he would never marry. Nor would he be a courtier. His friend, Philip Sidney, urged him to come to court, but he could never be alone there. He liked better than anything else to be alone, to ride, as he had been doing during these last days, by himself through the English country. He loved England so much, but there were many things wrong. He had passed groups of rioting disbanded soldiers, and wandering monks. He had seen rotting corpses hanging at the cross-roads, and in many places the people had not enough to eat. Why, if God were all-powerful, did He allow such things?

A very old question, Brother Andrew replied,

and, when he himself was young, he had experienced a dreadful time when he had gone far from God and lived evilly with women, and slept in the ditches, a drunken man. Then, one night, as he was sleeping in such a ditch, the Lord Christ had appeared to him in a dream and had called to him to rise and eat and drink with Him at the side of the road. He had heard a voice calling to him out of the sky and the voice had said to him:

‘Andrew! Andrew! I have blessed thee and given thee the power to be thy own judge and act of thy own free will! And, because I have done thee this favour, when I might have made thee a slave to *My* will, thou hast disgracefully used Me and thyself also. Arise and be worthy of thy own self-command.’

And so he had risen from the ditch and walked under the moon singing, and come to his right mind.

Brother Andrew told all this as though it were as truly a fact as the picture that he was painting, so that Robin had to believe him.

It was plain that Brother Andrew, once he had started, was very ready to talk, and he continued, painting all the while, but telling Robin everything about his life. How they had, none of them, any possessions in the world.

‘And what about your donkey?’ Robin asked.

Brother Andrew grinned like a naughty boy caught in apple-stealing. Yes, the donkey, Margaret, was his and his alone. She loved him and would be obedient to no one else, but stuck her feet in the ground and showed her teeth, if

anyone else tried to ride her.

He had prayed to God about Margaret and asked that it might not be reckoned a fault in him that he loved her so dearly. After the death of the Abbot and the dissolution of their monastery, he had been very lonely and had prayed that he might be given something or someone especial to love. And the very next morning a man had brought Margaret to the monastery, saying that he wished to sell her; and Brother Andrew had some pence for a barrel of apples that he had sold, and he had bought her. The man said that, in a little white circle on the underpart of her belly, the letters M.M. were marked, that her name was Margaret, and that she was the most human donkey in the whole world. This she had proved to be, and that was why he would place her in the window, a thing that would be a pleasure to the Abbot, who had been a very understanding man and undoubtedly was, in Paradise, an understanding Saint.

It was now approaching the middle of the day and Andrew asked Robin Herries whether he would eat with him, which Robin said he would be very glad to do.

When they went outside the church, Robin could not restrain a cry, for the snow had ceased to fall, the sun was shining, and the whole world, so far as the eye could see, was a white, shining crystal, the sun bathing the field of snow as though it were a lake. Where the ground rose towards the horizon, a rich purple shadow lay deep in the snow and small birds flew lazily in the blue sky.

The air was so fresh that you might say that it had never been air before: it seemed, in its biting cold-warm pungency, to have the scent of the hawthorn in the picture that Brother Andrew had been painting.

Beside the wall, her rough, shaggy coat shining in the sunlight, stood patiently Margaret. You felt that she was aware of the nearness of Robin's horse but would betray no unladylike interest. So soon as she saw Brother Andrew standing in the doorway of the church, she raised her head and, with her mild, patient eyes — eyes that accepted all the roughnesses of the world and turned them to unintentional charities — she stared across the sunny field at him, as much as to say:

'I am happy because the sun is shining and because you are here and because your painting is successful. For all these things, although I am but an ass, I thank God.'

She raised her head and brayed. Brother Andrew went across the field and stroked her and tickled her behind the ear.

'And now,' he said, 'we must eat.'

In the little room that might be called the vestry of the church there was a fire burning, and on the fire an iron pot. Into the pot Andrew put many strange things — grass and hedgerow stuff and part of a rabbit, and the small bones of some birds. He stood there, his thick legs spread wide beneath his robe, stirring, and at last he poured it into two wooden bowls, adding some black bread. And first he knelt down and praised God.

It was good and savoury as anything that Robin had ever eaten, and he wondered whether he had ever been so happy in all his life before, sitting there, dipping his bread into the soup, while the sun poured in and the snow shone on the hill beyond the window, sparkling with fire and stained with grape-purple shadow.

Brother Andrew went back to his painting and again Robin sat beside him. While he sat there he thought that he, too, might become a Franciscan. Would not such a life settle for him altogether his problems? To have no possessions, to own nothing, to give up everything to God! It was true that Brother Andrew had his donkey, but that was surely a possession that would never give him any trouble!

Robin was, at this time, so young that it still seemed to him possible to solve life's problems very easily. He looked at Andrew's exquisite painting, the loving, leisured way in which he added a little stroke of purple, gave the hawthorn blossom an added touch of rose-white, painted Margaret's tail with an extra twirl of liveliness! So he too could write poems for the glory of God!

Idly looking through the window on his left, he saw three soldiers in armour staring in at them.

'There are three soldiers outside looking at us.'

But that did not disturb Brother Andrew.

'Is one of them a stout, red-haired man, with a broken lip?'

'Yes.'

'They are soldiers of Sir Warren Trenchard,

whose manor is at Garth-in-Roselands. He is a merry heathen gentleman, and does not believe in God. But neither he nor his men will harm us.'

'They are making faces at us,' Robin said indignantly.

'They tossed Brother Ignatius once in a blanket, and then tried to make him drunk, and, when he would not, they stripped him naked and painted him in red and black colours.'

'I thought you said they never harmed you?'

Brother Andrew grinned as he held his round head on one side, looking at his painting.

'We did not like Brother Ignatius. Even the Abbot disliked him.'

'Oh, I see. . . . They have gone away now.'

An hour later the light was failing and Andrew must set off home. He asked Robin to spend the night at the ruined monastery and Robin readily agreed.

They went into the field. The donkey was not there. Only Robin's horse.

Andrew gave a cry. He picked up his skirts and ran. He ran about the field crying out:

'Margaret! Margaret!'

Robin thought that he had never seen so frantic a distress. The shadows were lying now in heavy bands across the snow and it was bitterly cold. Robin caught Andrew by the shoulder.

'Those soldiers took Margaret.'

Andrew nodded his head frantically.

'Yes, yes. . . . They have teased me before about her. They have threatened at other times . . .'



His face was puckered up like a baby's. There were tears on his round cheeks.

'Even *one* possession,' Robin thought, 'can bring a man to misery.'

He called out:

'I will go to Sir Warren Trenchard's house and bring Margaret back with me.'

The moment he had spoken the words he regretted them. He was young enough in any case to hate nothing so much as to make a fool of himself. His elder brother, Nicholas, had been always a giant of physical accomplishment, able for any feat of strength and famous through all the South of England. But Robin had been a scholar, and not so famous a scholar either. Ladies had loved him for his straight, slender legs and his dark eyes, but he was, as yet, virgin of ladies, and, in any case, loved his little cousin, Sylvia Herries.

His father, his brother, his mother, his cousins, all the friends of Mallory Court, were given to laugh at him, although in friendly fashion, for his shyness. He did not mind that *they* should laugh at him. He minded very much that others should. He was the poet, the artist in the Herries blood, and was the more reticent because the other half-Herries was material-minded, like his Uncle Henry, and altogether insensitive.

So now, when he said this to Brother Andrew, he was sorry at once. To go to a house that he did not know and claim a donkey! An incredible folly!

Then, when he saw in Andrew's eyes tears of relief and joy, he was ashamed of his own cowardice.

'Yes, yes! You go! You go!' Brother Andrew cried, clapping his hands and even skipping on the snow.

'They will give her to you! If a cast-off priest, whose monastery has not a roof to its head, comes, they mock him for a vagabond. But an elegant London gentleman — that is quite another matter . . . and remember that God is on your side and that Margaret has silver bells to her ears.'

So Robin rode off to the manor house in Garth-in-Roselands. He rode swiftly, so that he might have the job finished the quicker. He imagined, to strengthen himself, how his great brother Nicholas would do, now he would ride in to Sir Warren's courtyard and go forward and demand Margaret, and that his size and strength would make them render up the donkey even at sight of him.

Just outside the village there was a gallows, with three dead men hanging, and a huge black crow sitting on the head of one and picking at it. The snow now in the twilight was grey, but, as the sun sank, the sky faded into the green of a water-meadow and a few stars, like diamond buttons on a tunic, sparkled. The hanged men, their heads lazily on one side, swung slightly against the green sky.

The village street was deserted, but there was no question of the manor house, for there were two stone gryphons on stout pillars on either side of the beautiful iron-laced gate, and, beyond the gate, the stone path, the box hedges. The house, shaped like the letter F, was beautiful with its

many windows, divided by stone mullions and transoms into small panels, and the glass in small leaded quarries. The house was built mainly of narrow, rich red brick, with timber and plaster assisting. There was the music of a fountain, reminding Robin of Mallory, and suddenly the sky was filled with a multitude of stars 'like angels singing,' and the snow on the garden lawns was the colour of ivory.

The hall door was open, and Robin, walking forward, found himself in a company of people.

It was a fine hall and the fireplace was its central feature — a superb fireplace, grander than the one at Mallory — with an overmantel of wood, painted and gilt, the paintings being heraldic coats of arms. The firebacks and dogs were also ornamented. On the floor there was straw matting, which at that time was only in the houses of the rich, insanitary rushes being the usual wear. There were three tables and a cupboard set with gilt and silver plate. All these must be mentioned, for they showed Robin that he was in the house of one of the chief persons in Glebeshire. He saw at once Sir Warren himself, a stout, broad man with a grey, square beard, wearing a fur cloak over a suit of purple and silver.

Standing near the fire were several ladies and gentlemen: there were many dogs, a major-domo with a gilt-headed staff, and servants bearing drinks. Two men played on lutes and one sang. Robin stayed in the doorway until the verse was ended:

'The blushing cheek speaks modest mind;  
'The lips, befitting words most kind.  
'The eye does tempt to love's desire,  
And seems to say 'tis Cupid's fire.  
Yet all so fair but speak my moan,  
Since nought doth say the heart of stone.

Why thus, my love, so kind bespeak  
Sweet lip, sweet eye, sweet blushing cheek,  
Yet not a heart to save my pain?  
O Venus! take thy gifts again;  
Make not so fair to cause our moan,  
Or make a heart that's like our own.'

The music ceased. Sir Warren, laughing, called out something, then turned and saw Robin standing there. He cried out rather fiercely.

'And you, sir?'

'I have come,' Robin answered bravely, 'to fetch a donkey wrongfully stolen by your men.'

At the word 'donkey' everyone burst out laughing. One very beautiful dark lady, with a plumed hat, did not laugh, but stared at Robin and then gently smiled.

This encouraged Robin, so he stood his ground manfully, his hand on the gold hilt of his poignard. Sir Warren moved a space towards him and said courteously,

'That is an accusation, sir. . . . My men are not robbers, or only under necessity.' He added with irony, 'Whose donkey?'

'The donkey of a priest who is painting at the church on the moor.'

'You witnessed its stealing?'

'No, I did not. A space earlier I was in the

church and saw your men at the window. Afterwards the donkey was gone and the priest said——'

Sir Warren, who was plainly choleric, interrupted.

'Nursery tales. You did not see the animal stolen and yet you come here——'

'I say that it was stolen, and by your men——'

Sir Warren half drew his sword.

'Your name?'

'Robert Herries of Mallory Court in——'

'Never mind where. You must account to me for entering unasked my house and before my guests calling my men thieves.'

The beautiful lady interrupted:

'But it may be that the donkey is here. We must see. We must all judge.'

And they all caught it up, delighted that there should be a game, crying, 'The donkey! The donkey! The donkey!'

Trenchard, ashamed perhaps of showing anger in front of them, half turned, 'Well, we will discover . . .'

He turned to the door, and all of them, in a troop, followed laughing, dancing.

There were torches at the door, and, as they moved out into the snowy garden, they were like revellers in their gold and purple and dark, jetty black, the diamonds and the gold sparkling under the torchlight, while the sky, pierced now with cold, clear stars, gave them back their illumination.

Sir Warren led them round the house-corner to the stables. There, tethered to the door of a

stall, refusing the straw that a man offered her, shaking her head indignantly and ringing her bells, was Margaret.

Robin went up to her, but she did not know him, and, nervous already, poor female, at her rape, shot her ears back and showed her teeth.

'She does not know you,' Trenchard said sternly.

'She is not my donkey, but the priest's,' Robin answered. 'And her name is Margaret.'

'Margaret! Margaret!' the crowd echoed delightedly.

Trenchard asked the man to whom the donkey belonged and the man said:

'Wallis Despard.'

'Call him.'

Out of the dark of the stable, the stout soldier whom Robin had seen by the church appeared.

'Is this your donkey?' Trenchard asked him.

'Yes, master.'

'Whence had you her?'

'Of a seaman in Southampton — last twelve-month.'

'This gentleman' — Trenchard pointed disdainfully at Robin — 'swears that you stole it this very day of a priest at a church on the moor.'

The soldier, seeing that his master, annoyed by the affair, was on his side, answered heartily:

'By the Holy Cross, this is my donkey. They will all tell you so, master.'

He went on smoothly:

'This gentleman is mistaken in the donkey. It is true that I was by the church this day. Will

Boden was with me, and we saw a donkey tethered there. But it was not *my* donkey.'

'You lie!'

Robin, feeling that all eyes were mockingly upon him, was raging at them.

'Then,' Trenchard answered, 'if my man lies, you must prove it. He is *my* man and I take the charge on myself. You must prove it or answer to me.'

But he could not prove it. That was Margaret, and he and the soldier knew it. But Margaret could not speak and the soldier would not.

He saw disaster coming upon him. He had given them his name. It would be through England that he had behaved like a foolish, impertinent child. He could hear Nicholas's rebuke, see his father's mouth stiffen as he said: 'You must learn wisdom, my son. You are not fit yet for the world. . . .' He saw himself fighting a dozen of them: that would be the easiest way out. He stared with a frantic, beseeching gaze at Margaret, but that poor beast could not help him.

Then, in that brief instant before his humiliating surrender, he prayed:

'Oh God, who art everywhere, who led me this day to the church and showed me in the painting and in the glittering snow how beautiful is Thy handiwork, help me now, not for my sake but for Thy eternal justice.'

'Well, sir?' Trenchard said coldly.

Robin saw the soldier's grinning mouth, felt the stillness of their expectancy of his defeat. The answer came. He pointed at the soldier.

'If the donkey is his, and he has had her this year past, ask him what are the initials cut under her belly. He should know if she is his.'

Trenchard looked at him; then said sternly to the soldier:

'Answer him. What are the initials?'

The soldier shifted his body from foot to foot. He looked about him. He scowled, turned to the donkey, then muttered:

'There *are* no letters. How should I tell?'

'Certainly you must tell,' Trenchard answered him. 'You groom her, fasten the harness. There are *no* letters?'

'I know of none.'

Trenchard turned to Robin.

'The initials are——?'

'M.M.'

Trenchard, taking a lantern from a hook, went himself to Margaret, lowered the light and examined. Margaret, nervous and disturbed, bit him in the arm.

Andrew and Robin, a happy pair, riding in the starlight to the monastery, considered the matter.

'It proves to me one thing, Brother Andrew,' Robin said, 'that it is truly better in this life to have *no* possessions — not one single thing. For four hours of this day, Brother Andrew, in your distress, you have forgotten God.'

'Nay,' said Andrew, 'not so. For during all those hours I prayed to God. It proves rather that man is intended by God to love some earthly



thing — for only thus can he truly understand what God is.'

And he bent forward and tickled Margaret behind the ears. The silver bells tinkled crisply in the frozen air.

MR HUFFAM  
A CHRISTMAS STORY



## MR. HUFFAM

### A CHRISTMAS STORY

#### I

ONCE upon a time (it doesn't matter when it was except that it was long after the Great War) young Tubby Winsloe was in the act of crossing Piccadilly just below Hatchard's bookshop. It was three days before Christmas and there had been a frost, a thaw, and then a frost again. The roads were treacherous, traffic nervous and irresponsible, while against the cliff-like indifference of brick and mortar a thin, faint snow was falling from a primrose-coloured sky. Soon it would be dusk and the lights would come out. Then things would be more cheerful.

It would, however, take more than lights to restore Tubby's cheerfulness. Rubicund of face and alarmingly stout of body for a youth of twenty-three, he had just then the spirit of a damp face-towel, for only a week ago Diana Lane-Fox had refused to consider for a moment the possibility of marrying him.

'I like you, Tubby,' she had said. 'I think you have a kind heart. But marry you! You are useless, ignorant and greedy. You're disgracefully fat, and your mother worships you.'

He had not known, until Diana refused him, how bitterly alone he would find himself. He had money, friends, a fine roof above his head; he had seemed to himself popular wherever he went.

‘Why, there’s old Tubby!’ everyone had cried.

It was true that he was fat, it was true that his mother adored him. He had not, until now, known that these were drawbacks. He had seemed to himself until a week ago the friend of all the world. Now he appeared a pariah.

Diana’s refusal of him had been a dreadful shock. He had been quite sure that she would accept him. She had gone with him gladly to dances and the pictures. She had, it seemed, approved highly of his mother, Lady Winsloe, and his father, Sir Roderick Winsloe, Bart. She had partaken, again and again, of the Winsloe hospitality.

All, it seemed to him, that was needed was for him to say the word. He could choose his time. Well, he *had* chosen his time — at the Herries dance last Wednesday evening. This was the result.

He had expected to recover. His was naturally a buoyant nature. He told himself, again and again, that there were many other fish in the matrimonial sea. But it appeared that there were not. He wanted Diana and only Diana.

He halted at the resting-place half-way across the street, and sighed so deeply that a lady with a little girl and a fierce-looking Chow dog looked at him severely, as though she would say:

‘ Now this is Christmas time—a gloomy period for all concerned. It is an unwarranted impertinence for anyone to make it yet more gloomy.’

There was someone else clinging to this small fragment of security. A strange-looking man. His appearance was so unusual that Tubby forgot his own troubles in his instant curiosity. The first unusual thing about this man was that he had a beard. Beards were very seldom worn to-day. Then his clothes, although they were clean and neat, were most certainly old-fashioned. He was wearing a high sharp-pointed collar, a black stock with a jewelled tie-pin, and a most remarkable waistcoat, purple in colour, and covered with little red flowers. He was carrying a large, heavy-looking brown bag. His face was bronzed and he made Tubby think of a retired sea captain.

But the most remarkable thing of all about him was the impression that he gave of restless, driving energy. It was all that he could do to keep quiet. His strong, wiry figure seemed to burn with some secret fire. The traffic rushed madly past, but, at every moment when there appeared a brief interval between the cars and the omnibuses, this bearded gentleman with the bag made a little dance and once he struck the Chow with his bag and once nearly thrust the small child into the road.

The moment came when, most unwisely, he darted forth. He was almost caught by an imperious, disdainful Rolls-Royce. The lady gave a little scream and Tubby caught his arm, held him, drew him back.

‘That nearly had you, sir!’ Tubby murmured, his hand still on his arm. The stranger smiled — a most charming smile that shone from his eyes, his beard, his very hands.

‘I must thank you,’ he said, bowing with old-fashioned courtesy. ‘But damn it, as the little boy said to the grocer, “there’s no end to the dog,” as he saw the sausages coming from the sausage machine.’

At this he laughed very heartily and Tubby had to laugh, too, although the remark did not seem to him very amusing.

‘The traffic’s very thick at Christmas-time,’ Tubby said. ‘Everyone doing their shopping, you know.’

The stranger nodded.

‘Splendid time, Christmas!’ he said. ‘Best of the year!’

‘Oh, do you think so?’ said Tubby. ‘I doubt if you’ll find people to agree with you. It isn’t the thing to admire Christmas these days.’

‘Not the thing!’ said the stranger, amazed. ‘Why, what’s the matter?’

This was a poser because so many things were the matter, from Unemployment to Diana. Tubby was saved for the moment from answering.

‘Now there’s a break,’ he said. ‘We can cross now.’ Cross they did, the stranger swinging his body as though at any instant he might spring right off the ground.

‘Which way are you going?’ Tubby asked. It astonished him afterwards when he looked back and remembered this question. It was not his

way to make friends of strangers, his theory being that everyone was out to 'do' everyone, and in these days especially.

'To tell you the truth I don't quite know,' the stranger said. 'I've only just arrived.'

'Where have you come from?' asked Tubby.

The stranger laughed.

'I've been moving about for a long time. I'm always on the move. I'm considered a very restless man by my friends.'

They were walking along very swiftly, for it was cold and the snow was falling fast now.

'Tell me,' said the stranger, '—about its being a bad time. What's the matter?'

What was the matter? What a question!

Tubby murmured:

'Why, everything's the matter — unemployment — no trade — *you* know.'

'No, I don't. I've been away. I think everyone looks very jolly.'

'I say, don't you feel cold without an overcoat?' Tubby asked.

'Oh, that's nothing,' the stranger answered. 'I'll tell you when I *did* feel cold though. When I was a small boy I worked in a factory putting labels on to blacking-bottles. It was cold *then*. Never known such cold. Icicles would hang on the end of your nose!'

'No!' said Tubby.

'They did, I assure you, and the blacking-bottles would be coated with ice!'

By this time they had reached Berkeley Street. The Winsloe mansion was in Hill Street.



'I turn up here,' said Tubby.

'Oh, do you?'

The stranger looked disappointed. He smiled and held out his hand.

Then Tubby did another extraordinary thing. He said:

'Come in and have a cup of tea. Our place is only five yards up the street.'

'Certainly,' the stranger said. 'Delighted.'

As they walked up Berkeley Street, he went on confidentially.

'I haven't been in London for a long time. All these vehicles are very confusing. But I like it — I like it immensely. It's so lively, and then the town's so quiet compared with what it was when I lived here.'

'Quiet!' said Tubby.

'Certainly. There were cobbles, and the carts and drays screamed and rattled like the damned.'

'But that's years ago!'

'Yes. I'm older than I look.'

Then, pointing, he added:

'But that's where Dorchester House was. So they've pulled it down. What a pity!'

'Oh, everything's pulled down now,' said Tubby.

'I acted there once — a grand night we had. Fond of acting?'

'Oh, I'd be no good,' said Tubby modestly, 'too self-conscious.'

'Ah, you mustn't be self-conscious,' said the stranger. 'Thinking of yourself only breeds

trouble, as the man said to the hangman just before they dropped him.'

'Isn't that bag a terrible weight?' Tubby asked.

'I've carried worse things than this,' said the stranger. 'I carried a four-poster once, all the way from one end of the Marshalsea to the other.'

They were outside the house now and Tubby realized for the first time his embarrassment. It was not his way to bring anyone into the house unannounced, and his mother could be very haughty with strangers. However, here they were and it was snowing hard and the poor man was without a coat. So in they went. The Winsloe mansion was magnificent, belonging in all its features to an age that was gone. There was a marble staircase and up that the stranger almost ran, carrying his bag like a feather. Tubby toiled behind him but was, unhappily, not in time to prevent the stranger from entering through the open doors of the drawing-room.

Here, seated in magnificent state, was Lady Winsloe, a roaring fire encased with marble on one side of her, a beautiful tea-table in front of her, and walls hung with magnificent imitations of the great Masters.

Lady Winsloe was a massive woman with snow-white hair, a bosom like a small skating-rink, and a little face that wore a look of perpetual astonishment. Her dress of black-and-white silk fitted her so tightly that one anticipated with pleasure the moment when she would be compelled to rise. She moved as little as possible, she said

as little as possible, she thought as little as possible. She had a very kind heart and was sure that the world was going straight to the devil.

The stranger put his bag on the floor and went over to her with his hand outstretched.

'How are you?' he said. 'I'm delighted to meet you!'

By good fortune, Tubby arrived in the room at this moment.

'Mother,' he began, 'this is a gentleman——'

'Oh, of course,' said the stranger, 'you don't know my name. My name's Huffam,' and he caught the small white podgy hand and shook it. At this moment, two Pekinese dogs, one brown and one white, advanced from somewhere violently barking. Lady Winsloe found the whole situation so astonishing that she could only whisper:

'Now, Bobo — now, Coco!'

'You see, Mother,' Tubby went on, 'Mr. Huffam was nearly killed by a motor-car and I rescued him and it began to snow heavily.'

'Yes, dear,' Lady Winsloe said, in her queer husky little voice that was always a surprise coming from so vast a bosom. Then she pulled herself together. For some reason Tubby had done this amazing thing, and whatever Tubby did was right.

'I do hope you'll have some tea, Mr——?' She hesitated.

'Huffam, ma'am. Yes, thank you. I *will* have some tea!'

'Milk *and* sugar?'

'All of it!' Mr. Huffam laughed and slapped his knee. 'Yes, milk *and* sugar. Very kind of

you indeed. A perfect stranger as I am. You have a beautiful place here, ma'am. You are to be envied.'

'Oh, do you think so?' said Lady Winsloe, in her husky whisper. 'Not in these days — not in these terrible days. Why, the taxes alone! You've no idea, Mr——?'

'Huffam.'

'Yes. How stupid of me! Now, Bobo! Now, Coco!'

Then a little silence followed and Lady Winsloe gazed at her strange visitor. Her manners were beautiful. She never looked *directly* at her guests. But there was something about Mr. Huffam that *forced* you to look at him. It was his energy. It was his obvious happiness (for happy people were so very rare). It was his extraordinary waist-coat.

Mr. Huffam did not mind in the least being looked at. He smiled back at Lady Winsloe, as though he had known her all his life.

'I'm so very fortunate,' he said, 'to find myself in London at Christmas-time. And snow, too! The very thing. Snowballs, Punch and Judy, mistletoe, holly, the pantomime — nothing so good in life as the pantomime!'

'Oh, do you think so?' said Lady Winsloe faintly. 'I can't, I'm afraid, altogether agree with you. It lasts such a *very* long time and is often so exceedingly vulgar!'

'Ah, it's the sausages!' said Mr. Huffam, laughing. 'You don't like the sausages! For my part I dote on 'em. I know it's silly at my age,

but there it is — Joey and the sausages. I wouldn't miss them for anything.'

At that moment a tall and exceedingly thin gentleman entered. This was Sir Roderick Winsloe. Sir Roderick had been once an Under-Secretary, once a Chairman of a Company, once famous for his smart and rather vicious repartees. All these were now glories of the past. He was now nothing but the husband of Lady Winsloe, the father of Tubby, and the victim of an uncertain and often truculent digestion. It was natural that he should be melancholy, although perhaps not so melancholy as he found it necessary to be. Life for him was altogether without savour. He now regarded Mr. Huffam, his bag and his waistcoat, with unconcealed astonishment.

'This is my father,' said Tubby.

Mr. Huffam rose at once and grasped his hand.

'Delighted to meet you, sir,' he said.

Sir Roderick said nothing but 'Ah' — then he sat down. Tubby was suffering now from a very serious embarrassment. The odd visitor had drunk his tea and it was time that he should go. Yet it seemed that he had no intention of going. With his legs spread apart, his head thrown back, his friendly eyes taking everyone in as though they were all his dearest friends, he was asking for his second cup.

Tubby waited for his mother. She was a mistress of the art of making a guest disappear. No one knew quite how she did it. There was nothing so vulgarly direct as a glance at the clock or a

suggestion as to the imminence of dressing for dinner. A cough, a turn of the wrist, a word about the dogs, and the thing was done. But *this* guest, Tubby knew, was a little more difficult than the ordinary. There was something old-fashioned about him. He took people naively at their word. Having been asked to tea, he considered that he *was* asked to tea. None of your five minutes' gossip and then hastening on to a cocktail-party. However, Tubby reflected, the combination of father, mother *and* the drawing-room, with its marble fireplace and row of copied Old Masters, was, as a rule, enough to ensure brief visitors. On this occasion also it would have its effect.

And then — an amazing thing occurred! Tubby perceived that his mother *liked* Mr. Huffam, that she was smiling and even giggling, that her little eyes shone, her tiny mouth was parted in expectation as she listened to her visitor.

Mr. Huffam was telling a story — an anecdote of his youth.\* About a boy whom he had known in his own childhood, a gay, enterprising, and adventurous boy who had gone as page-boy to a rich family. Mr. Huffam described his adventures in a marvellous manner, his *rencontre* with the second footman, who was a snob and Evangelical, of how he had handed biscuits through the pantry window to his little sister, of the friendship that he had made with the cook. And, as Mr. Huffam told these things, all these people lived before your eyes, the pompous mistress with her car-trumpet, the cook's husband who had a wooden

leg, the second footman who was in love with a pastrycook's daughter. The house of this young page-boy took on life, and all the furniture in it, the tables and chairs, the beds and looking-glasses, everything down to the very red woollen muffler that the footman wore in bed, because he was subject to colds in the neck. Then Lady Winsloe began to laugh and Sir Roderick Winsloe even laughed, and the butler, a big, red-faced man, coming in to remove the tea, could not believe his parboiled eyes, but stood there, looking first of all at his mistress, then at his master, then at Mr. Huffam's bag, then at Mr. Huffam himself, until he remembered his manners and, with a sudden apologetic cough, set sternly (for himself this disgraceful behaviour of his employers was no laughing matter) about his proper duties.

But best of all perhaps was the pathos at the end of Mr. Huffam's story. Pathos is a dangerous thing in these days. We so easily call it sentimentality. Mr. Huffam was a master of it. Quite easily and with no exaggeration he described how the sister of the little page-boy lost some money entrusted to her by her only too bibulous father, of her terror, her temptation to steal from her aged aunt's purse, her final triumphant discovery of the money in a band-box!

How they all held their breaths! How vividly they saw the scene! How real was the sister of the little page-boy! At last the story was ended. Mr. Huffam rose.

'Well, ma'am, I must thank you for a very happy hour,' he said.

Then the most remarkable thing of all occurred, for Lady Winsloe said:

‘ If you have not made any other arrangements, why not stay here for a night or two — while you are looking about you, you know? I’m sure we should be delighted — would we not, Roderick?’

And Sir Roderick said:

‘ Ah — ah — certainly.’

## II

On looking back, as he so often did afterwards, into the details of this extraordinary adventure, Tubby was never able to arrange the various incidents in their proper order. The whole affair had the inconsequence, the coloured fantasy, of a dream — one of those rare and delightful dreams that are so much more true and reasonable than anything in one’s waking life.

After that astounding invitation of Lady Winsloe’s, in what order did the events follow — the cynical luncheon-party, the affair of Mallow’s young woman (Mallow was the butler), the extraordinary metamorphosis of Miss Allington? All of these were certainly in the first twenty-four hours after Mr. Huffam’s arrival. The grand sequence of the Christmas Tree, the Mad Party, the London Vision, were all parts of the tremendous climax.

At once, Tubby realized, the house itself changed. It had never been a satisfactory house; always one of those places rebelliously determined



not to live. Even the rooms<sup>o</sup> most often inhabited — the drawing-room, the long, dusky dining-room, Sir Roderick's study, Tubby's own bedroom — sulkily refused to play the game. The house was too large, the furniture too heavy, the ceilings too high. Nevertheless, on the first evening of Mr. Huffam's visit, the furniture began to move about. After dinner on that evening there was only the family present. (Miss Agatha Allington, an old maid, a relation with money to be left, an unhappy old woman, suffering from constant neuralgia, had not yet arrived.) There they were in the drawing-room and, almost at once, Mr. Huffam had moved some of the chairs away from the wall, had turned the sofa with the gilt, spiky back more cosily towards the fire. He was not impertinent nor officious. Indeed, on this first evening, he was very quiet, asking them some questions about present-day London, making some rather odd social enquiries about prisons and asylums and the protection of children. He was interested, too, in the literature of the moment and wrote down in a little note-book an odd collection of names, for Lady Winsloe told him that Ethel M. Dell, Warwick Deeping, and a lady called Wilhelmina Stitch who wrote poetry, were her favourite writers, while Tubby suggested that he should look into the work of Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley. They had, in fact, a quiet evening which ended with Mr. Huffam having his first lesson in Bridge. (He had been, he told them, when he had last 'tried' cards, an enthusiastic whist player.) It was a

quiet evening, but, as Tubby went up the long, dark staircase to his room, he felt that, in some undefined way, there was excitement in the air. Before undressing he opened his window and looked out on to the roofs and chimney-pots of London. Snow glittered and sparkled under a sky that quivered with stars. Dimly he heard the recurrent waves of traffic, as though the sea gently beat at the feet of the black, snow-covered houses.

'*What* an extraordinary man!' was his last thought before he slept. Before he had known that he would have Mr. Huffam as his guest, Tubby had invited a few of his clever young friends to luncheon — Diana, Gordon Wolley, Ferris Band, Mary Polkinghorne. Gathered round the Winsloe luncheon-table, Tubby regarded them with new eyes. Was it because of the presence of Mr. Huffam? He, gaily flaunting his tremendous waistcoat, was in high spirits. He had, all morning, been revisiting some of his old haunts. He was amazed. He could not conceal, he did not attempt to conceal, his amazement. He gave them, as they sat there, languidly picking at their food, a slight notion of what East London had once been — the filth, the degradation, the flocks of wild, haggard-eyed, homeless children — Mary Polkinghorne, who had a figure like an umbrella-handle, an Eton crop and an eye-glass, gazed at him with bemused amazement.

'But they say our slums are awful. I haven't been down there myself, but Bunny Carlisle runs

a Boys' Club and *he* says . . .!

Mr. Huffam admitted that he had seen some slums that morning, but they were nothing, nothing at all, to the things he had seen in his youth.

'Who *is* this man?' Ferris Band whispered to Diana.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'Some one Tubby picked up. But I like him.'

And then this Christmas!

'Oh dear,' young Wolley sighed, 'here's Christmas again! Isn't it awful! I'm going to bed. I shall sleep, and I hope dream, until this dreadful time is over.'

Mr. Huffam looked at him with wonder.

'Hang up your stocking and see what happens,' he said.

Everyone screamed with laughter at the idea of young Wolley hanging up his stocking. Afterwards, in the drawing-room, they discussed literature.

'I've just seen,' Ferris Band explained, 'the proofs of Hunter's new novel. It's called *Pigs in Fever*. It's quite marvellous. The idea is, a man has scarlet fever and it's an account of his ravings. Sheer poetry.'

There was a book on a little table. He picked it up. It was a first edition of *Martin Chuzzlewit* bound in purple leather.

'Poor old Dickens,' he said. 'Hunter has a marvellous idea. He's going to rewrite one or two of the Dickens books.'

Mr. Huffam was interested.

Rewrite them?' he asked.

'Yes. Cut them down to about half. There's some quite good stuff in them hidden away, he says. He'll cut out all the sentimental bits, bring the humour up to date, and put in some stuff of his own. He says it's only fair to Dickens to show people that there's something there.'

Mr. Huffam was delighted.

'I'd like to see it,' he said. 'It will make quite a new thing of it.'

'That's what Hunter says,' Band remarked. 'People will be surprised.'

'I should think they will be,' Mr. Huffam remarked.

The guests stayed a long time. Mr. Huffam was something quite new in their experience. Before she went, Diana said to Tubby:

'What a delightful man! Where *did* you find him?'

Tubby was modest. She was nicer to him than she had ever been before.

'What's happened to you, Tubby?' she asked. 'You've woken up suddenly.'

During the afternoon, Miss Agatha Allington arrived with a number of bags and one of her worst colds.

'How are you, Tubby? It's kind of you to ask me. What horrible weather! What a vile thing Christmas is! You won't expect me to give you a present, I hope?'

Before the evening, Mr. Huffam made friends with Mallow the butler. No one knew quite how he did it. No one had ever made friends with

Mallow before. But Mr. Huffam went down to the lower domestic regions and invaded the world of Mallow, Mrs. Spence, the housekeeper, Thomas the footman, Jane and Rose the housemaids, Maggie the scullery-maid. Mrs. Spence, who was a little round woman like a football, was a Fascist in politics, said that she was descended from Mary Queen of Scots, and permitted no one, except Lady Winsloe, in her sitting-room. But she showed Mr. Huffam the 'photographs of the late Mr. Spence and her son, Darnley, who was a steward on the Cunard Line. She laughed immeasurably at the story of the organ-grinder and the lame monkey. But Mallow was Mr. Huffam's great conquest. It seemed (no one had had the least idea of it) that Mallow was hopelessly in love with a young lady who assisted in a flower shop in Dover Street. This young lady, apparently, admired Mallow very much and he had once taken her to the pictures. But Mallow was shy. (No one had conceived it!) He wanted to write her a letter, but simply hadn't the courage. Mr. Huffam dictated a letter for him. It was a marvellous letter, full of humour, poetry and tenderness.

'But I can't live up to this, sir,' said Mallow. 'She'll find me out in no time.'

'That's all right,' said Mr. Huffam. 'Take her out to tea tomorrow, be a little tender. She won't worry about letters after that!'

He went out after tea and returned powdered with snow, in a taxi-cab filled with holly and mistletoe.

'Oh dear,' whispered Lady Winsloe, 'we haven't decorated the house for years. I don't know what Roderick will say. He thinks holly so messy.'

'I'll talk to him,' said Mr. Huffam. He did, with the result that Sir Roderick came himself and assisted. Through all this, Mr. Huffam was in no way dictatorial. Tubby observed that he had even a kind of shyness — not in his opinions, for here he was very clear-minded indeed, seeing exactly what he wanted, but he seemed to be aware, by a sort of ghostly guidance, of the idiosyncrasies of his neighbours. How did he know, for instance, that Sir Roderick was afraid of a ladder? When he, Mallow, Tubby and Sir Roderick were festooning the hall with holly, he saw Sir Roderick begin timidly, with trembling shanks, to climb some steps. He went to him, put his hand on his arm, and led him safely to ground again.

'I know you don't like ladders,' he said. 'Some people can't stand 'em. I knew an old gentleman once terrified of ladders, and his eldest son, a bright, promising lad, *must* become a steeple-jack. Only profession he had a liking for.'

'Good heavens!' cried Sir Roderick, paling. 'What a horrible pursuit! Whatever did his father do?'

'Persuaded him to be a diver instead,' said Mr. Huffam. 'The lad took to it like a duck to water. Up or down, it was all the same to him, he said.'

In fact, Mr. Huffam looked after Sir Roderick

as a father his child, and, before the day was out, the noble Baronet was asking Mr. Huffam's opinion on everything — the right way to grow carnations, the Gold Standard, how to breed dachshunds, and the wisdom of Lord Beaverbrook. The Gold Standard and Lord Beaverbrook were new to Mr. Huffam, but he had his opinions all the same. Tubby, as he listened, could not help wondering where Mr. Huffam had been all these years. In some very remote South Sea island surely! So many things were new to him. But his kindness and energy carried him forward through everything. There was much of the child about him, much of the wise man of the world also, and behind these a heart of melancholy, of loneliness.

'He has, it seems,' thought Tubby, 'no home, no people, nowhere especially to go.' And he had visions of attaching him to the family as a sort of secretarial family friend. Tubby was no sentimentalist about his own sex, but he had to confess that he was growing very fond of Mr. Huffam. It was almost as though he had known him before. There were, in fact, certain phrases, certain tones in the voice that were curiously familiar and reminded Tubby in some dim way of his innocent, departed childhood.

And then, after dinner, there was the conquest of Agatha Allington. Agatha had taken an instant dislike to Mr. Huffam. She prided herself on her plain speech.

'My dear,' she said to Lady Winsloe, 'what a ruffian! He'll steal the spoons.'

'I don't think so,' said Lady Winsloe with dignity. 'We like him very much.'

He seemed to perceive that Agatha disliked him. He sat beside her at dinner — he wore a tail-coat of strange, old-fashioned cut, and carried a large gold fob. He was, as Tubby perceived, quite different with Agatha. He was almost, you might say, an old maid himself — or, rather, a confirmed old bachelor. He discovered that she had a passion for Italy — she visited Rome and Florence every year — and he described to her some of his own Italian journeys, taken many years ago: confessed to her that he didn't care for frescoes, which he described as 'dim virgins with mildewed glories'. But Venice! Ah! Venice! with its prisoners and dungeons and lovely iridescent waters! All the same, he was always homesick when he was out of London, and he described the old London to her, the fogs and the muffin-bells and the 'growlers,' and enchanted her with a story about a shy little bachelor, and how he went out one evening to dine with a vulgar cousin and be kind to a horrible godchild. Indeed they all listened, spellbound: even Mallow stood, with a plate in his hand and his mouth open, forgetting his duties. Then, after dinner, he insisted that they should dance. They made a space in the drawing-room, brought up a gramophone, and set about it. Then how Mr. Huffam laughed when Tubby showed him a one-step.

'Call that dancing!' he cried. Then, humming a polka, he caught Agatha by the waist and away they polkaed! Then Lady Winsloe, who had



adored the polka once, joined in. Then the Barn Dance. Then, few though they were, Sir Roger.

‘I know!’ Mr. Huffam cried. ‘We must have a party!’

‘A party!’ almost screamed Lady Winsloe. ‘What kind of a party?’

‘Why, a children’s party, of course. On Christmas night.’

‘But we don’t know any children! And children are bored with parties. And they’ll all be engaged anyway.’

‘Not the children *I’ll* ask!’ cried Mr. Huffam. ‘Not the party *I’ll* have! It shall be the best party London has seen for years!’

### III

It is well known that good-humoured, cheerful, and perpetually well-intentioned people are among the most tiresome of their race. They are avoided by all wise and comfort-loving persons. Tubby often wondered afterwards why Mr. Huffam was *not* tiresome. It was perhaps because of his childlikeness; it was also, most certainly, because of his intelligence. Most of all it was because of the special circumstances of the case. In ordinary daily life, Mr. Huffam *might* be a bore — most people are at one time or another. But on this occasion no one was a bore, not even Agatha.

It was as though the front wall of the Hill Street house had been taken away and all the detail and incidents of these two days, Christmas

Eve and Christmas Day, became part of it. It seemed that Berkeley Square was festooned with crystal trees, that candles — red and green and blue — blazed from every window, that small boys, instead of chanting 'Good King Wenceslas' in the usual excruciating fashion, carolled with divine voices, that processions of Father Christmases, with snowy beards and red gowns, marched from Selfridges and Harrods and Fortnum's, carrying in their hands small Christmas trees, and even attended by reindeer, as though brown-paper parcels tied with silver bands and decorated with robins fell in torrents through the chimney, and gigantic Christmas puddings rolled on their own stout bellies down Piccadilly, attended by showers of almonds and raisins. And upon all this, first a red-faced sun, then a moon, cherry-coloured and as large as an orange, smiled down, upon a world of crusted, glittering snow, while the bells pealed and once again the Kings of the East came to the stable with gifts in their hands. . . .

Of course, it was not like that — but most certainly the Winsloe house was transformed. For one thing, there was not the usual present-giving. At breakfast on Christmas Day, everyone gave everyone else presents that must not by order cost more than sixpence apiece. Mr. Huffam had discovered some marvellous things — toy dogs that barked, Father Christmases glistening with snow, a small chime of silver bells, shining pieces of sealing-wax.

Then they all went to church at St. James's, Piccadilly. At the midday meal Sir Roderick had

turkey and Christmas pudding, which he hadn't touched for many a day.

In the evening came the Party. Tubby had been allowed to invite Diana — for the rest the guests were to be altogether Mr. Huffam's. No one knew what was in his mind. At 7.15 exactly came the first ring of the door-bell. When Mallow opened the portals, there on the steps were three very small children, two girls and a boy.

'Please, sir, this was the number the gentleman said,' whispered the little girl, who was very frightened. Then up Hill Street the children came, big children, little children, children who could scarcely walk, boys as bold as brass, girls mothering their small relations, some of them shabby, some of them smart, some with shawls, some with mufflers, some with collars, some brave, some frightened, some chattering like monkeys, some silent and anxious — all coming up Hill Street, crowding up the stairs, passing into the great hall.

It was not until they had all been ushered up the stairs by Mallow, were all in their places, that Sir Roderick Winsloe, Bart., Lady Winsloe, his wife, Tubby Winsloe, their son, were permitted to see their own drawing-room. When they did they gasped with wonder. Under the soft and shining light the great floor had been cleared, and at one end of the room all the children were gathered. At the other end was the largest, the strongest, the proudest Christmas Tree ever beheld, and this Tree shone and gleamed with candles, with silver tissue, with blue and gold and

crimson balls, and so heavily weighted was it with dolls and horses and trains and parcels that it was a miracle that, Tree as it was, it could support its burden. So there it was, the great room shining with golden light, the children massed together, the gleaming floor like a sea, and only the crackle of the fire, the tick of the marble clock, the wondering whispers of the children for sound.

A pause, and from somewhere or other (but no one knew whence) Father Christmas appeared. He stood there, looking across the floor at his guests.

‘Good evening, children’ he said, and the voice was the voice of Mr. Huffam.

‘Good evening, Father Christmas’ the children cried in chorus.

‘It’s all his own money,’ Lady Winsloe whispered to Agatha. ‘He wouldn’t let me spend a penny.’

He summoned them then to help with the presents. The children (who behaved with the manners of the highest of the aristocracy—even *better* than that, to be truthful) advanced across the shining floor. They were told to take turn according to size, the smallest first. There was no pushing, no cries of ‘I want *that!*’ as so often happens at parties, no greed and satiety. At last the biggest girl (who was almost a giantess), and the biggest boy (who might have been a heavy-weight boxing champion) received their gifts. The Tree gave a little quiver of relief at its freedom from its burden, and the candles, the silver tissue, the red and blue and golden balls shook

with a shimmer of pleasure because the present-giving had been so successful.

Games followed. Tubby could never afterwards remember what the games had been. They were no doubt Hunt the Slipper, Kiss in the Ring, Cross-your-Toes, Last Man Out, Blind Man's Buff, Chase the Cherry, Here Comes the Elephant, Count Your Blessings, and all the other games. But Tubby never knew. The room was alive with movement, with cries of joy and shouts of triumph, with songs and kisses and forfeits. Tubby never knew. He only knew that he saw his mother with a paper cap on her head, his father with a false nose, Agatha beating a child's drum — and on every side of him children and children and children, children dancing and singing and running and sitting and laughing.

There came a moment when Diana, her hair dishevelled, her eyes shining, caught his arm and whispered:

‘Tubby, you are a dear. Perhaps — one day — if you keep this up — who knows?’

And there was a sudden quiet. Mr. Huffam, no longer Father Christmas, arranged all the children round him. He told them a story, a story about a circus and a small child who, with her old grandfather, wandered into the company of those strange people — of the fat lady and the Living Skeleton, the jugglers and the beautiful creatures who jumped through the hoops, and the clown with the broken heart and how his heart was mended.

‘And so they all lived happily ever after,’ he

ended. Everyone said good-night. Everyone went away.

'Oh dear, I *am* tired!' said Mr. Huffam. 'But it has been a jolly evening!'

Next morning when Rose the housemaid woke Lady Winsloe with her morning cup of tea she had startling news.

'Oh dear, my lady, the gentleman's gone!'

'What gentleman?'

'Mr. Huffam, my lady. His bed's not been slept in and his bag's gone. There isn't a sign of him anywhere.'

Alas, it was only too true. Not a sign of him anywhere. At least one sign only.

The drawing-room was as it had always been, every chair in its proper place, the copied Old Masters looking down solemnly from the dignified walls.

One thing alone was different. The first edition of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in its handsome purple binding was propped up against the marble clock.

'How very strange!' said Lady Winsloe. But, opening it, she found that on the fly-leaf these words were freshly written:

For Lady Winsloe  
with gratitude  
from her Friend  
the Author -

And, under this, the signature, above a scrawl of thick black lines, 'Charles Dickens'.

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